

A SKULL AND TWO CRYSTALS

by

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I dedicate this book to my children :

PIERS, for doing sums for me;

GEORGINA, for a flagon of Mead when I most needed it;

MARK, for the recently observed oddities of Mercury's orbit;

SELINA, for correcting my grammar from time to time.

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter One</i>	
I The Woman	9
II The Hierarch	11
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
I Envoy	19
II Mimas	22
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
I To Fling an Orb	34
II A Question of Orbit	40
III Body Control	45
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
I Five Kilomegahertz	53
II Reconnaissance	57
III Requirement for Special Equipment	62
IV Requirement for Special Talents	66
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
I Makettrig and Affinity	71
II To Dispose of an Unwanted Passenger	77
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
I New Experience for a Titanian	82
II Strange Locomotion	88
III Like a Finger Pointing	95
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	
I Need for Communication	98
II No Longer Your Responsibility	102

III	The Rattle of a Tiny Drum	104
IV	Boots Without	110
<i>Chapter Eight</i>		
I	Light Practice in Mindcontrol	117
II	The Great Tree	122
III	Among the Green	127
<i>Chapter Nine</i>		
I	Pulsed Jet Mode	138
II	Crys-s-stal	151
III	Marbles in Space	158
<i>Chapter Ten</i>		
I	First of the Sun	166
II	Antechamber	171
III	The Halls	179
IV	Return to a Crystal Column	187

Chapter One

I—THE WOMAN

Maketttrig scowled out at the stars, thinking about the woman. Characteristically, he stood before the unshuttered transparency of his battle orb with his feet astraddle, his hands behind his back, his chin tilted slightly upwards, and in the soft light shed by the luminescent disk in the dome of the control chamber behind him his bell of fiery red hair glowed like an ember. A sudden subtle change in the pressure of his soles on the deck warned him, without need of a pointer reading, that the plasma drive had cut out, paragrav cut in—though on any other occasion, the orb would have left him in free fall. But this time, for the sake of the woman, paragrav.

A bell chimed.

‘Limit of Zone of Prohibition achieved,’ a sweetly neuter voice announced flatly.

He continued to gaze outwards moodily, swinging his glance now from the night side of Titan through a distance of a million, two hundred thousand kilometres, to the Rings framing Saturn’s crescent—a sight which would normally have pleased him.

‘Aha. Master of all we survey.’

Maketttrig, perhaps a little too inclined on occasions to take himself seriously, sensed the irony and his scowl deepened. But because the woman was to be his passenger for the next several days, whether he liked it or not, he mastered himself and turned to bestow on her a glance that was merely aloof. She was standing at the foot of the ladder leading up to one

of the two cubicles which on this mission, especially for her sake, had been clamped to the inner hull of the orb above the shower and waste converter unit. She looked about her, frowning slightly.

'I thought I heard a voice.'

'Seven-Double-Seven's, I expect—my orb's. We've completed our ascent from the planet.'

'So this machine speaks!'

She came forward slowly, her glance passing curiously from the circular control console in the centre of the hemispherical chamber to the four guns bulking within their safety cages in each quadrant at deck level. Now as she came nearer still, he noticed for the first time that she was wearing a circlet of yellowish metal round her head—gold? Yes, gold, undoubtedly. It clasped her raven hair close to her crown, supporting an object in the centre of her forehead. And then, as she came nearer yet, he suffered a small, yet distinct, shock as he recognized it for what it was. A skull! A golden skull. And for eyes in its sockets . . . two stones? No, crystals—but quite unlike any he had ever seen before. It might have been the way in which the rays of the light disk struck them, yet they seemed to glow with a milky radiance of their own and in their depths tiny sparkles gleamed. The effect of them in that golden skull, lying against her brown skin, was almost hypnotic and he found it difficult to remove his gaze from the baneful, if beautiful, thing. At length he lowered his still slightly shocked stare to meet hers. She lifted one of her eyebrows to give him a quizzical smile.

'I don't suppose you've been told much about me?'

Was she trying to be funny? From the moment he had been summoned by Roland the affair had been tinged with mystery . . .

II—THE HIERARCH

Arabesques of vines, green, convoluted and graceful: the motif, common to all Hierarchs' quarters, was said to be a symbol of the planet from which mankind had stemmed, but was alien now to eyes which never saw such shapes outside a museum. Makettrig, riding the up current of the gravshaft leading to his uncle's chambers, scarcely noticed the surrounding greenery; he had seen it before and his thoughts were troubled.

Roland was his father's brother, yet the summons had come in the formal mode. Why? Not Lydia, because that was all over now and in any case it would have been a matter for avuncular advice, rather than a formal confrontation with a priest of the Hierarchy. He had an uneasy suspicion, amounting to near certainty, that he knew well enough what his uncle wanted to see him about.

The current wafted him onto a landing to face a white door, above the lintel of which a huge Eye was outlined in gold. As he walked up to the door, a tiny jewel-like sensor inset in it fluoresced.

He said, 'Warden Makettrig to see Roland the Hierarch. By formal appointment.'

There was a just perceptible pause while the chambers' administrative brain consulted its instructions, then its dulcet voice announced, 'You are welcome. Enter.'

The door recessed and slid aside silently.

He passed through into a circular hall, chose a door to his right and entered a wedge-shaped room. The sylvan décor of the gravshaft was repeated here, but with a difference; for three of the walls were moulded in low relief to display a number of irregularly-shaped columns, brownish in colour, which near their tips bifurcated into many slender limbs, them-

selves sprouting numerous green, elliptical disks. The room, his uncle had told him, represented a 'glade' among 'trees'. The furniture, an oval table with a scattering of chairs, was in style, apparently made of the same brownish 'wood' and for Titan's gravity unnecessarily massive. The lighting was similarly weird, golden shafts being somehow made to seem as if they pierced through the greenery from a hidden source above.

The fourth wall merged into the arched ceiling and was a segment of material so pelucid that only experience and the fact that he was still breathing told him that it was there. Its outlook was one which he favoured, but a resonant voice halted him before he could reach it.

'You're punctual, Makettrig.'

Makettrig turned to greet his uncle.

The ankle length green robe of Roland's calling imposed a certain grace on his otherwise—by Titanian standards—blocky figure. He was not a handsome man, his features seeming rugged in comparison to the fine-drawn delicacy which was the average of his race; but the penetrating quality of his regard distinguished him even among that large-eyed people.

Makettrig bowed his head to him, as custom prescribed, but in his own abrupt manner. 'Yes, sir. I understood this was to be a formal interview.'

Roland smiled faintly. 'Correct. But I'd like a word with you on a more personal level first.' He pointed to one of the chairs at the table. 'Sit down, nephew.' He himself took a seat opposite, his elbows resting on the table top, his hands clasped before him, and for a few moments studied the other silently. Then, as if he had decided in his own mind on some line of attack, he placed his palms flat and leaned back. 'The One-Above-All has blessed you,' he began abruptly. 'Like it or not, you have a special gift. You're a mindcontrol emper.'

Makettrig's broad forehead, huge green eyes and rather pointed chin gave his face an elphin look, but at that moment

the priest found himself comparing it more to the legendary mule of Earth.

Makettrig said woodenly, 'Yes, sir.'

Roland's sigh contained more than a hint of exasperation, but his tone remained studiously calm as he continued, 'My own reaction to your gift is complex. Envy in part, I'll confess. There've been occasions when I've wished that I also had the power to enter into a fellow being's mind. To know his difficulties and co-suffer them.'

Makettrig shrugged. 'Aren't you making too much of it, sir? One can't do it to just anybody. Has to be an affinity. And an origin of the affinity—some significant experience shared in the past—or to be shared in the future, I gather. But I'm no theorist, of course.'

'But I, a priest of the Hierarchy, am,' Roland said sternly. 'Why, the opportunities your gift can give for research into the human psyche!—were you aware there's gathering evidence that an affinity can originate in a past incarnation?'

'Yes, I'd heard that.' Makettrigg smiled crookedly. 'But one life's enough for me, without having to bother about a previous!'

Roland's brows came together. 'How old are you?'

'Forty-seven.'

'Hm. With another two and a half centuries to live you may think like that now. But you'll do well to remember that you're talking to a person for whom death is not quite so remote an event.'

'Your pardon, sir.'

'It is granted.' Roland continued to stare at his nephew, a trifle bleakly now. 'You're still something of a child. Your orb's still a toy to you—but I suppose you've also heard that at least one of your kind has recently shown signs of a new attribute? Teleportation—the power to move from place to place at . . . how shall I say it—at the blink of a thought?'

'I'd heard of that too, sir,' Makettrig said indifferently.

'But so far as I know you can't move guns that way. And the orbs are armed.'

Again Roland frowned, then seemed to recover, for he went on with a sigh, 'Never mind. Because it's the other aspect of your particular talent which concerns me most. I have to acknowledge that the fact that there are people amongst us like you who have the power to compel instant obedience fills me with something like terror. I even understand that if you felt so inclined you could make me, a priest of the Hierarchy, do as you wished. It's not without good reason,' he added sombrely, 'that its mere existence is kept secret from the majority.'

'I'm well aware of that, sir!' Makettrig exclaimed bitterly. 'And it's been dinned into me often enough what'll happen if I ever misuse it. Exile. If not worse.'

Roland's glance softened. He nodded compassionately. 'I know. Your training's been strict. Rigorous. Even so, I strongly feel such a power is too dangerous to be loose outside the restraints and disciplines of the priesthood.'

This, Makettrig thought, was it. In fact, he had been thinking that this would be the subject matter of the formal part of the interview. Apparently it wasn't. But whatever that might be, he doubted if it could be more serious, for this involved an attack on his future. Roland, his penetrating gaze still resting on his nephew's face, saw the sudden change of expression and knew that a door was being shut. Softly this time, he sighed again. He said gently and a little sadly :

'I promised your father I'd speak to you again before I broached the real subject of this interview. Why are you so obstinate, nephew? Why are you so set against entering the priesthood? Most young men of our race would consider it the highest honour.'

'I know that, sir.'

'Then why?'

Makettrig's gaze became abstracted. Why? He wasn't very sure himself. For the moment entirely forgetting his uncle, he

rose and went to stand before that pelucid outer wall.

The view was familiar to him, of course: one of the two mountainous regions which before man ever ventured into space had shown through primitive telescopes as dark patches on Titan's otherwise yellowish disk. This aspect, however, was not one which he was privileged so very often to see; for the room was a quadrant of a dome perched on the tip of Copernicus-the-Mountain's highest peak, three thousand, five hundred metres above mean surface level. Copernicus-the-City was below, its innumerable passages and caverns burrowed into the surrounding massif. From here, the outlook was one of considerable grandeur, for the dark rock of the peak cascaded down and away until, far, far below it banked a methane stream, like a golden thread in Saturn's reflected light. Thereafter, the stream curved away from the mountain, enticing his gaze through the length of a valley so straight and narrow that it was more a ravine, to reach at length, perhaps fifteen kilometres distant, a crater enfolding a tarn like a golden disk. Very still lay the methane there, for on Titan such winds as might blow were no more than a stirring of molecules so sparsely scattered as scarcely to deserve the name atmosphere. There was enough of one, nevertheless, to deposit on the mountain flanks a thin methane rhime, whence exuded the stream, and which to Makettrig's great, sensitive eyes shone greenly—with a hint of gold and other colours, too, for this was on the planet-facing hemisphere of the satellite and Saturn loomed large above, russet streaks staining the yellow bands of its clouds. The mountains were a wilderness of needle shapes against the galaxy's glitter, their nearer peaks each seeming to own its private star: the lights of the city's eyries. And in the cliffs and ledges on the face of the valley directly opposite more lights gleamed from the windows and enclosed balconies of the troglodyte city.

And on a ledge of the mountain a thousand or so metres below him his battle orb rested. Which made him picture now the reaches of space, the dark immensities and the

tiny, fierce fires among them, the pale disk of a planet swinging by. If he became a priest, he would have to abandon all that. Yet it wasn't that which made him so reluctant. Something else . . . a conviction, but obscure and without logical backing, that in some sense he was destined . . . and not for the priesthood. Yet how could he explain so nebulous a feeling? Aloud, he said :

'I have another gift too, sir. PsiE. I can fling an orb. There aren't so many who can do that and don't we need wardens as much as priests?'

Roland remained silent for some moments, his gaze resting on the other almost with pity. 'Yes, we need wardens,' he admitted at length. 'But that's not the real reason behind your refusal. Is it?' Then receiving no reply he continued, 'It sometimes seems to me that you're not yet a complete being. I have the strange notion that you're a man in search of his soul and I'd have thought the priesthood was the best calling for that sort of quest. However, no one can force you. The choice is yours and evidently you've made it.' His manner altered abruptly. 'So we'll pass on to the formal part of this interview, Warden Makettrig.'

He felt among the folds of his robe and produced from a hidden pocket a cube of cloudy material on a box-like metal plinth, which Makettrig recognized as a hologram. Roland set it on the table between them, but without activating the image within it and without explanation.

'What do you know of the history of Mercury?' he asked.

Makettrig lifted his eyebrows in surprise. 'Not much, sir. Colonized before the white-yellow wars by people from the Indian sub-continent of Earth, wasn't it?'

'That's so. And remained something of a mystery ever since.' Roland stared reflectively at the hologram. 'Before you see what's in that, I think a brief résumé of the political background might help.

'The perfection by our ancestors of the magnetic fusion bottle and the plasma drive just before the outbreak of the

wars gave them the monopoly of space travel. Whereas we, their descendants, inhabit only the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn, then they had Earth's moon and Mars and Venus as well. In the light of the approaching conflict and being numerically inferior to the yellow races, they were forced to seek allies. The black races remained adamantly neutral, but on the Indian sub-continent were a brown people who traditionally feared the yellow. In return for their commitment, our ancestors gave them Mercury, and the spacecraft and techniques to supply and maintain a colony. The wars came.

'The mutual extermination of the warring races enabled the resurgent black nations quickly to liquidate such pockets of the shattered civilizations as remained in the Southern hemisphere and they mastered the globe. Their inheritance of the techniques of the fusion bottle and the plasma drive opened the solar system to them. They invaded and exterminated the colonies on Earth's moon, on Mars and on the Highlands and poles of Venus. Only the extreme distances and our development of metapsychological talents have so far saved us from the same fate—it was the wardens of Ganymede in their battle orbs who flung back the Inner Planet fleets during the recent war.

'So far as we know, there were no Mercurians among their forces then and we had assumed until recently that the original colonists had shared the same fate with the rest.

'Now, though the Inner Planets may have been defeated and peace signed, there is still a war party on Earth. As ever, our race stands faced by the threat of a numerically superior enemy. We still need allies.'

Roland ceased speaking and at last reached out to touch a control in the plinth of the hologram. The cloudy cube lit with polarized light and a three dimensional image sprang into being within it. Makettrig leaned forward to stare with intense interest, but found himself no further enlightened by what he saw. He looked up at the other questioningly.

Roland had evidently expected some other and stronger reaction, for now his eyebrows rose and he said sharply, 'Pick it up and have a closer look.'

Maketrig did so.

The image, tiny, yet so perfect in every detail that it seemed alive, was of a slim, graceful woman wearing a close fitting tunic and trousers of some rose-red, silken stuff which left her arms bare. Her shoulder length, raven hair, swept back from a high forehead; her skin was light brown. She held herself straightly, more than a little proudly and there was a hint of laughter in her glance as she seemed to stare at him from out of her glassy cage. Her features were clear cut, her nose thin, while her body was exquisitely formed and very feminine. Being what he was, Maketrig was undisturbed by the almost blatant sexuality in her and was able, quite dispassionately, to decide that she was a beautiful woman. He glanced up to encounter his uncle's steady regard again.

'Who is she, sir?'

'You don't recognize her?'

'No, sir.'

'She's a Mercurian. Her full name is Lilamani Lakshman Singh. Does that help?'

Maketrig shook his head wonderingly. 'Not a bit. Never seen her before in my life!'

'That's strange. Because she has asked for you to return with her to Mercury. She asked for you by name.'

'Asked for *me*! Must have picked me at random from a list.'

'That's what we thought. Until she gave a very precise description of your physical appearance—your red hair and green eyes make a distinctive combination.'

'It's you she meant, Warden Maketrig.'

Chapter Two

I—ENVOY

She didn't suppose he had been told much about her!

Yet he did know a few slender facts: her name and her planet of origin; that she and her people were descendants of the original colonists; that she had piloted solo a small plasma drive craft on a supra-ecliptical trajectory overleaping the orbits of all the intervening planets and asteroids—a long and lonely journey, so she must have skill and courage; above all, that she had come as an emissary to find a particular man.

And he, apparently, was that man.

What could make him so particular? Mindcontrol emping? Well, the talent was rare, but not unique, and in any case it was unlikely that she would have heard of it—unless her people had something of the sort themselves. Even then, how would she have known that he had it? For as Roland had said its possession was kept secret from all but a very small circle of people for a very sound reason. Roland had been able to tell him no more. He had looked at him a trifle sourly and said, 'Since you've decided to remain a warden, you'll take your orders now. You go with her. Whatever they want you for, it's our first opportunity for contact, so we're giving you the status of Envoy. You will consider yourself as our representative and do all in your power to promote friendly relations. Remember, our races were allies once.'

He had then gone on to give him certain instructions, which, in spite of his last remark, were to be kept private from her until events themselves disclosed them—instructions

which might, Makettrig thought, at least give an added interest to the journey.

Perhaps she was about to enlighten him further now. For after a brief meeting before boarding the orb she had closeted herself in her cubicle during the lift off and they had not been alone together until this moment. He let his glance wander over her.

She had come aboard carrying a small case, which had presumably contained the gold circlet, for she had not been wearing it then. On the other hand, she was wearing the same rosy tunic and trouser outfit which he had seen in the hologram. She would have no change of clothing and assuming the silken stuff of her suit had the same quality as his uniform, he was not surprised, for it would be self-cleansing and creaseless, needing only an occasional shake. Now his glance met hers and he suffered a very faint shock, for during a moment of time so tiny that it could probably have been measured in nano-seconds something in his mind reverberated to something in hers and simultaneously a faint crease appeared on her brow then was gone, and his feeling passed, and was forgotten. His glance flicked again to the golden skull on her forehead. Had it significance? It had a certain sinister beauty, but it was not the sort of thing he would have chosen for an ornament.

Answering her question at long last, he said a trifle grimly, 'You're right. Been told practically nothing about you. But what I'd like to know first is why you want *me*.'

Her eyes narrowed and for a moment the haughtiness which he had seemed to see in the hologram now quite definitely peeked from them. 'You needn't flatter yourself that the choice is a personal one.'

Makettrig had a temper which too frequently matched his hair and his riposte had a distinct growl in it. 'I don't care whether the choice was by computer or committee in session. But I've a right to know why I in particular am wanted—what am I supposed to do when we get to Mercury?'

She said coolly, 'I understand you've been promoted to the status of Envoy from being a mere warden.'

Maketttrig scowled. 'Wardens aren't "mere". But a priest of the Hierarchy would have made a better candidate, I agree. So, why me?'

Very obviously, she was not used to being addressed in that tone for her chin went up and her eyes flashed and the golden circlet had for a moment the look of a crown. She said stiffly, 'I regret I'm not at liberty to disclose that, until it has finally been determined that you are in fact the man we want. That will not be until we reach our destination. You will have to restrain your curiosity till then.'

'I see. So it's like that. And if I'm not the man you want? What then?'

'I'll have wasted my time. But not you. You'll be accepted as an accredited Envoy of Titan. Isn't that what your government wants? An Envoy to my people—even a bad one, rather than none at all?'

Maketttrig glared and for a moment dithered speechlessly in search of a cutting rejoinder. Yet her words so exactly described Roland's attitude to the mission that he could almost hear him speaking through her and his hitherto dormant humour woke at last. He grinned. 'All right! At least tell me how you knew what I looked like, without ever having set eyes on me. Or is that a secret too?'

'But I had seen you. On Mimas. And I think you saw me.'

'On Mimas?' he said blankly.

She nodded and as she did so the strangely radiant crystals in the golden skull, the tiny points of light in their depths glinting, caught his glance. Undoubtedly their effect was hypnotic, for his gaze remained unmoving while his memories took life. The figure in the hooded cloak, he thought.

It had not been a particularly happy experience, that visit . . .

II—MIMAS

On the moons of Saturn and Jupiter techniques of analysis and synthesis had been developed to such a degree that all materials necessary for the support of life were available for their peoples, from oxygen to the most complex proteins. If man was no longer a parasite here, if here he had mastered his harshest environment, he had also suffered a loss. There were no dogs, no cats to befriend him in the caverns and corridors of the troglodyte cities; no birds sang. Of the beauties which only growing things can give to a landscape he knew nothing: there were no trees nor grasses to sway in the winds; there were no winds. And though flowers might still give him pretty names for his colours, none scented the air. The traditional decorative motif of the Hierarchs' chambers tacitly acknowledged the loss, yet tastes had changed. Makett-rig, for instance, found the twisting shapes of the vines in the gravshaft leading to his uncle's chambers chaotic and alien; but he delighted in the view from his uncle's eyrie, where an Earthman would have thought it unbearably stark and forbidding. Yet there were sights in the Solar System which all men in common, whatever their planet of origin, found beautiful. Of these, the view of the Rings of Saturn as seen from the planet-facing hemisphere of Mimas was judged supreme.

This was fortunate for the peoples of the Saturnian satellites, because men still bartered their wares between the worlds: the gold of the Inner Planets, for example, being exchanged for the Brain Crystals which grew only on the Jovian satellites. While Mimas traded her views of the Rings.

And Lydia was now an official of the Tourist Service.

Her mother and his had been sisters; and when her parents, both wardens like his, had disappeared together on a mission

of exploration to a cometary object beyond the orbit of Pluto some thirty years previously she had been adopted into his family, becoming his sister as well as his cousin—no bar, however, to marriage among a people who habitually used bioengineering to evolve their branch of the race—the reverse perhaps. She and he were of an age and since she, like him, had the talent of psiE, they had decided together to follow their parents' profession. And all had gone well until quite recently. For she had failed where he had succeeded.

The flinging of an orb was as much an art as a science, as much a skill as a technique and, above all, as much an act of faith as the operation of a special talent. In the past, wardens had been known to lose that essential faith in themselves under the stress of battle and, in particular, during long periods of solitude. They had, in their jargon, been struck 'dumb'. For this reason a species of test had been devised, in which at the end of his, or her, cadetship each warden had to undergo solitary vigil in one of the Temples. Makettrig remembered his own and how under the mute and terrible gaze of the Eye a panic of loneliness had welled in him, bringing in its train a feeling of awe and such deep dread that he had been tempted to turn and flee from the Presence which he had begun to sense all about him. Others had fled the Temples and they were not despised, but pitied, for it was an axiom of the faith of his people that the One-Above-All had many faces—not all benign. Yet if a warden could not endure an Encounter in the Temple, so the argument ran, how much less would he be able to do so alone in the void, as inevitably he must, and then with no hope of escape? Lydia's failure had not been total, for she could fling an orb under normal conditions, but it had been profound. She had run from her Vigil. And in the bitterness of her failure she had switched from the loneliness, from the austerity and self-discipline of a warden's life to a career almost exactly the opposite; in which she need never be alone; which required frequent, if shallow, contact with a maximum variety of

people; which imposed no self-denial, encouraging, rather, an acquaintance with luxury. Makettrig had not seen her since then, for her bitterness, however unjustly, had seemed to include him. He was worried about her and missed her, she had been so much a part of his life. And he was coming to Mimas that day to heal the rift the best way he knew how.

There had been a considerable number and variety of people visiting her dome on that day. He stood at the entrance of the central hall, where she had agreed they should meet, looking about him expectantly. The throng seemed to include representatives from every inhabited body in the Solar System, though the pale peoples of the Outer Planets predominated, the pastel shades of their tunics and trousers weaving eddies and streamers of gentle colour. Here and there, however, black men and women from the Inner Planets a head taller than the large-eyed, dainty people who surrounded them, pranced ponderously in the almost negligible gravity of this minuscule world, the skirts of their garish togas swirling lazily.

Still unable to see Lydia, he made his way with floating strides to the counter of an information booth. A pretty girl behind it looked up enquiringly, her expression altering subtly as she registered the black tunic and trousers of his uniform (for the duties of wardens included law enforcement, as well as defence, and if their pay was small their prestige was high).

'Can I help you, Warden?' she asked respectfully.

'My name's Makettrig. I've an appointment with one of your officials. Lydia. She manages this dome, I think.'

'I'll tell her you're here, Warden.'

She left the booth and some minutes passed. At length she returned alone. She looked at him uncomfortably.

'Lydia sends her apologies, Warden. Some important foreigners have arrived unexpectedly. She cannot leave them.'

Maketttrig's green eyes blazed and the mood in which he had started on the visit underwent an abrupt reversal. He had come a million, one hundred thousand kilometres to meet her, he thought angrily. Was there no other official who could have deputised for her? The girl eyed him apprehensively.

'She—she says if you're able to wait,' she continued falteringly, 'she could come to the viewing balcony as soon as she's free. But she doesn't know how long that will be. She—she thinks it might be best if you came back some other time.'

Once Maketttrig had embarked on a project, however, he was not easily turned aside.

'Tell her I'll wait,' he said harshly.

He turned away from the booth, scowled around him, caught sight of an illuminated sign above a gravshaft and glanced at his ring watch. He had intended to talk over a meal, but if his plan had gone awry that was no reason why he should fast. He let the down current of the shaft float him into the bowels of the tiny world.

The restaurant was a large, square room some hundreds of metres below ground, but optical devices projected a quadrant of the horizon on each of the walls, giving the illusion that the diners were eating at surface level. The ceiling was luminescent, its colour changing periodically to the rhythm of a swooning melody which ill suited his new mood. Box-like tables, each with a complement of four chairs were scattered throughout the floor space, but all within sight were occupied. A man in the pale gold tunic and trousers of the Tourist Service came up to him, bowing.

'I regret. We are very full today, Warden. Could you return later? Unless you have no objection to sharing?'

Maketttrig glanced round, having no wish in his present humour to meet strangers. 'There's an unoccupied table,' he said suddenly, pointing.

The man followed the line of his arm. 'I regret. That is reserved, Warden.'

Makettrig's eyebrows rose: reservations were seldom permitted in public restaurants of this type. He eyed the man coldly. 'Reserved?'

The man's tone became apologetic. 'By an official of the Tourist Service, Warden. She has a party of important personages.' He spread his hands as if to say that such things were beyond his control.

'She? Her name Lydia by any chance?'

'Why, yes, that is so, Warden!'

Makettrig came to a sudden decision. 'I'll share her table.'

The man raised both his palms to shoulder height. 'Impossible, Warden! With herself, she will have a party of four.'

'Bring another chair.'

'But these tables are only designed . . .'

Makettrig stared at him.

'Very well, Warden. If you insist.'

Makettrig threaded his way to the table and sat down.

It was well situated, being next to that wall which displayed Mimas's major attraction. His act of sitting must have tripped a relay, because a douce machine voice began to lecture him.

'From Mimas to the nearest edge of Ring A is one hundred and seven thousand, two hundred kilometres. Ring A is sixteen thousand kilometres wide. Cassini's Division, a gap of two thousand, eight hundred kilometres, separates it from Ring B. Ring B is the densest, containing much ice. It is twenty-six thousand, four hundred kilometres wide. Observe the Diamond Light . . .'

'Stars!' Makettrig muttered. He felt round the table for a control and the burbling voice died abruptly.

The facts might bore him, but never the scene itself. The orbit of Mimas is not quite in the plane of the Rings and at this moment there was just sufficient inclination for a part of the annulus to show as a vast coloured arch, soaring from nadir to zenith and framing Saturn's huge banded disk from

the other half of a star-glittering sky. From his angle none of the Divisions, nor the Gap could be seen and the three main rings stretched away in a gradation of colouring from yellow through white, without visible breaks, into the grey of the Crêpe Ring, which itself seemed to grow out of the planet. But from Mimas, and from Mimas alone, was that greatest wonder to be seen, the so-called Diamond Light, the optical freak caused by a myriad particles of ice in Ring B refracting the light of the distant sun. And even though his mind was very much on the coming encounter, his gaze was held.

'Makettrig!'

In view of the circumstances, the shrillness in the voice was scarcely surprising, but it boded ill for any reconciliation. His lips thinned perceptibly as he rose and turned to meet a furiously indignant glance from blue eyes.

'Hello, Lydia,' he said a little bleakly. 'Sorry we couldn't meet where we'd agreed. But this will do as well. Mind if I share your table?'

'I most certainly do mind,' she said icily. 'It's reserved. Officially.' She gestured to some men in her train. 'I have guests. There isn't a chair for you.'

'There will be.' He nodded blandly towards an attendant, just then approaching.

Lydia stared speechlessly. The pale gold of her uniform matched the shade of her hair very pleasantly, he noted sardonically, which was more than could be said of her expression. Then she found her voice.

'I might have expected this! You never could—'

'Say, Lydia, don't you worry for our sakes. I guess we'd be pleased to meet your friend.'

Though mankind had for some time spoken a common language, accents and idioms varied considerably among the worlds: in Makettrig's ears the deep voice had a pronounced nasal drawl. Its owner now smiled and winked at him. He was black, tall, even by Inner Planet standards, quite dwarfing Lydia beside him—and Makettrig as well. He had a hooked

nose and flashing eyes. Lydia's expression changed instantly and obviously as she turned to smile at him.

'How kind of you, Councillor.'

And it did not escape Makettrig's notice that her tone seemed to have more than a casual warmth. But her glance was distinctly chilly again as she returned it to him.

'As I said, I might have expected this. You must have got my message. But I suppose you thought you were being snubbed. And no one, but no one, snubs Warden Makettrig with impunity!' She smiled at her companions apologetically. 'We were children together. May I introduce you?' She waved her hand first to the man who had intervened on his behalf. 'Councillor Mboya. And Councillor Ngala. Both of Earth.' Her glance sought the third person. 'Your pardon, sir. I didn't catch your name when we met.'

'I am Shams,' a guttural voice announced from behind Mboya's right shoulder.

They sat, Lydia busying herself with the table's controls, while Makettrig discreetly studied her guests. His first impression of Mboya had been favourable on the whole, but it was otherwise with Councillor Ngala. He was a much older-looking man, with hair like a closely-fitting cap of grey wool perched on the back of his head and deep-set eyes. His black cheeks were hollow and his lips, obviously once full in the Negro fashion, were wrinkled and liverish. Makettrig's glance was suddenly caught by an oval object showing in the V of his scarlet toga. It was like a large locket, the casing chased and studded with jewels; but the strangeness—no, the horror of it was the manner in which it seemed actually to be imbedded in the scanty flesh over his sternum. Seeing that Ngala had noticed his stare, Makettrig quickly transferred his attention to the third man, the somewhat enigmatic individual who had neglected to reveal his planet of origin. His features were difficult to see, since he sat unmovingly with his back to the wall display, presenting little more than a silhouette, yet enough to show that he also was something of

an oddity. For the outline of his head was huge and, by the black sheen of his scalp, totally bald. He had placed his chair at a slight distance from the table, as if wishing to hold himself aloof. Nevertheless, their glances met and Makettrig suffered a very faint shock, for during a moment of time so tiny that it could probably have been measured in nano-seconds something in his mind reverberated to something in the other's and simultaneously a faint crease appeared on the huge brow then was gone, and Makettrig's feeling passed, and was forgotten.

By now, Lydia had completed her operation of the controls and a tray rose through a dilating aperture in the table's centre, bearing a stack of plates, spoons, and a dish containing several oblongs of a jelly-like substance, each differently coloured. She distributed the utensils, then offered the dish deferentially to Ngala, thus, it seemed, distinguishing him as the senior guest. He inspected it suspiciously.

'What's this, eh?' he said in a high, cracked voice.

'You haven't eaten our food before, Councillor? Then may I recommend the blue portion? I think you'll like its flavour.'

'That our meal! No meat? No meat, eh? Eh?'

'Meat?' Lydia repeated in shocked tones. 'The flesh of living beings, you mean? . . .' Her voice failed as she stared in dismay.

Mboya chuckled deeply. 'I guess they just don't have meat in these parts, Councillor. I guess one of those things got just about everything your body needs. That right, Lydia?' He turned a flashing glance in her direction.

She nodded wordlessly.

Ngala helped himself, his shrivelled lips twisting with disdain. She passed the dish to Mboya.

'You got no suggestion for me, Lydia?'

She smiled at him. 'Why not try the pink one?'

Possibly her smile had contained something more than mere gratitude, for now his manner and mode of address changed

subtly. 'You think I'll like it, Lydia girl? Why, then, I guess I will.'

He passed the dish on. Shams, who had sat silent and unmoving throughout these exchanges, bisected one of the remaining portions with finicky precision.

It was now Makettrig's turn. He reached forward to help himself, then paused involuntarily, hearing a faint, rhythmical, whirring sound. His glance strayed to the jewelled object on Ngala's chest. Ngala put down his spoon with a clatter and leaned forward, tapping the thing with the nail of his forefinger so that it gave out a sound like a small tin drum. Makettrig raised his gaze to encounter such a look of concentrated malevolence as his minor rudeness had scarcely warranted.

'Don't know what this is, eh?' Ngala said in his high, old man's voice. 'I know another young man who looked at it like that. He was a nasty young man. He did a terrible thing to me. Yes. You wear the same uniform, too. I know your sort. You're what they call a warden, eh? Eh?'

Makettrig stared. 'Yes, I'm a warden. Of Titan.'

'Titanian, Ganymedan, all the same. Big eyes, little bodies. Nasty young men. I know your sort.' His finger nail beat a further rapid tattoo. 'My heart! That's what this is! My heart! Better than flesh! Heh, heh! So don't you try any tricks like the other one did. Won't work a second time. *Won't work!*' he ended in a screech.

'Say, Councillor,' Mboya said in his soft drawl. 'I reckon the war's over now, so let's enjoy ourselves. Tell you what, Lydia girl. You got the proper stuff to wash the meal down? Like wine, maybe?'

There was a visible easing of tension as Lydia worked the table's controls and a bottle and glasses appeared. She filled glasses for Ngala and Mboya—but Shams, Makettrig observed, declined. As did he, since wardens took wine on special occasions only and then much diluted. Lydia was no longer subject to the same restriction, yet he saw, with a little

catch of compassion, that she hesitated before helping herself.

Talk thereafter took a safer turn, Lydia becoming briskly informative, for it appeared that the party was about to embark on a grand tour of the Jovian system. Maketrig lost interest—though he could not help noticing that as their glasses emptied even Ngala was excluded and the conversation became increasingly a duologue between Lydia and Mboya. His glance strayed and fell upon a figure in a hooded cloak sitting by itself at a far table. And because such a style seemed without function in the enclosures of his environment he was momentarily intrigued. The figure's features were shadowed by the hood and indistinguishable, but something glinted fleetingly beneath it about where the forehead should be, then he felt, rather than saw, its eyes watching him fixedly and he turned away. And shortly the meal came to an end. He moved himself closer to Lydia as she rose to her feet.

'You free now?'

She shook her head impatiently. 'No. Not for an hour, at least. Wait in the viewing balcony, as I suggested. I'll come there as soon as I can.'

At that, remembering how he had pre-arranged this meeting and had come so far, he lost what little patience he had. He turned to her companions abruptly. 'Your pardon, sirs. I must borrow Lydia for a few minutes. We have a private matter to discuss.'

'What's that?' Ngala snapped. 'Impossible! Our schedule! I won't hear—'

'Why, now, Councillor,' Mboya interposed smoothly, 'we can spare Lydia for half-an-hour, surely. You just show us the way to this viewing balcony you told us about, Lydia girl, and leave us to soak up that magnificent view.'

Shams remaining silent, as he had throughout the meal, Lydia was forced to agree, however reluctantly. She conducted the party to the balcony, then led Maketrig apart to a small chamber. Once they were alone, however, she faced him challengingly, her colour high, her blue eyes sparkling fiercely.

'This is about the most inconvenient time you could have chosen to come.'

He fought a brief battle with himself and managed to say mildly enough. 'You agreed it.'

'I must have been mad!'

He had already begun seriously to doubt his wisdom in coming, she seemed to have altered so much. Yet he could still remember their childhood and the early days of their cadetship together and, as has been said, his mind was not easily changed. He looked at her sadly for some moments, then, abruptly, his manner became formal. He bowed.

'Lady, I ask you to share Vigil with me.'

Her cheeks lost their colour.

For wardens to share Vigil had always been a mark of close friendship: between single wardens of equal status and opposite sex it had become through time equivalent to the sanctification of marriage. It had therefore come as second nature for Makettrig, wholly and willingly in thrall to the traditions and disciplines of his calling, to phrase his proposal as he had. Yet he should, and, if her reception of him had been kinder, perhaps he would have been sensitive enough to realize that she might see it in another light.

'You dare—' she gasped. 'You dare to ask *me* that!'

Too late, he saw just what he had done: that in effect he had asked her to return to the Temples, which she had fled; that he had used a symbolism particular to a service which she had renounced. He said quickly, 'I shouldn't have said it that way. I forgot. I'm very sorry. I meant to say, Will you marry me? That's all I meant, Lydia.'

'And just what,' she asked icily, 'makes you think I should want to do that?'

A sudden feeling of intense relief washed through him, though not unmixed with guilt, as he found himself able to admit at last that he had never in fact wanted to marry her; that his proposal had been made out of compassion, not from love. And in his heart, perhaps, he had expected her to

accept it as a beggar would largesse. He said a trifle lamely :
‘We were children together. We’re related. We have so much in common. And haven’t we always been friends? Aren’t those good enough reasons?’

‘Friends? I begin to wonder. A real friend wouldn’t have talked about sharing Vigil with *me!*’

‘I’ve said I’m sorry.’

‘So much in common, you say. If it was ever true, it certainly isn’t now! You’re a warden. A man dedicated to violence—’

‘To the control of violence,’ he said sharply.

She seemed not to have heard him. ‘Trained to kill! A professional murderer!’

His temper began to fray. ‘Nonsense! You’re in the Reserve yourself. And we have to defend ourselves—remember Ganymede,’ he added meaningly.

Whether he had intended it or not, she chose to read a double significance into his addition. Her eyes flashed and her chest began to heave. ‘I’m in the Reserve through no choice of mine. And if that last remark was aimed at Councillor Mboya, well, he may be an Earthman, but at least he’s a man! . . . Marry you? Why, you’d only take me to bed when you wanted a child! You’re not a man, you’re a neuter. When I marry, it’ll be to a man! A proper man!’

He stared at her, his lips tight, his face white. Then he gave her a final jerky bow, swung round and left her.

Chapter Three

I—TO FLING AN ORB

Maketttrig came out of his reverie with his gaze still fixed on the skull's crystal eyes. He looked down to find the woman watching him expectantly. At least, he thought, she hadn't brought that extraordinary garment on board—presumably she had left it behind in the craft she had come in.

'You were the person in the hooded cloak,' he said positively.

She nodded.

'Yes, I remember. Taking rather more than a casual interest, you were.'

But now her expression changed and she looked away, as if she found the necessity for her next question faintly embarrassing. 'Who was that woman who was with you?'

'My foster sister,' he said laconically.

Her glance switched back to him frowning. 'Your foster sister? Does that mean you see much of her?'

A bleak note crept into his voice. 'First time I'd seen her in months. Why do you ask?'

She fended his question with another. 'Who were the men with her?—please don't think I'm being impertinent. It could be important—I didn't see one of them properly.'

'Couple of Earth Councillors, called Mboya and Ngala. Oh, and another—let me think . . . Ah, yes. A man called Shams.'

'Shams . . . How well does your foster sister know those men?'

He shrugged. 'Not very well, I should imagine. She was acting as their guide—important people, I gathered . . . Though she seemed to be getting pretty friendly with Mboya,' he added pensively.

'Does she know about your mission?'

'Haven't seen her since. But she could have heard through my parents, or my uncle. Does it matter?'

'Normally, it wouldn't have. But with Shams there . . . If she has heard of your journey and mentioned it to him, he could . . . Well, he could cause trouble.'

'Not very likely, is it?' He smiled reflectively. 'I'd have expected any trouble to have come from Ngala. Unpleasant man with a tin heart and a hatred of wardens—but you needn't worry.' He slapped his hand on the console. 'In Seven-Double-Seven, we're safe from any trouble.'

She gave him a strange look, in which he thought he detected fear—or something very like it.

'Don't underrate Shams,' she said after a short silence. 'If you ever meet him again, don't do that. He has . . . powers.'

Makettrig, himself possessing 'powers', allowed himself an inward smile. Outwardly, he remained grave, looking at her expectantly. But evidently she felt she had already said more than enough for her lips were firmly closed. Realizing he was unlikely to get anything else from her at present, he decided to change the subject to a minor matter which had been nagging him.

'My name's Makettrig, as you know. We only give ourselves a single name on Titan, so that's how you call me. But you seem to have three. So what do I call you? Lilamani, or Lakshman, or Singh? Or do I have to use all of them? One hopes not.'

For a brief moment the haughty look returned to her eyes, but then she smiled. 'You may call me Lilamani—but correctly please, like this: Lee-lah-mun-ee. In our ancient tongue it means Jewel of Delight. Has your name a meaning?'

'If it has, I don't know it. But that's a pretty name you

have. And I like its meaning. Very suitable, I feel sure.'

For the first time since he had met her, her smile held a hint of genuine warmth. 'That was nicely said—for you, I think. Thank you, Ma-kett-rig—is that right? Makettrig . . . Before we started this conversation, Makettrig, you said this machine had completed its ascent from the planet. What happens next?'

It was now his turn to show signs of embarrassment. He gave her a hooded look, not quite sure in his own mind how best to broach the matter.

'You've never been in an orb before, of course,' he said abruptly.

She shook her head.

'Know anything at all about them?'

'Nothing. I shall be most interested to watch.'

'Then I'm afraid you'll have to be disappointed.' He gave her a quick glance and saw by her suddenly gelid expression that she would be unlikely to accept what he was about to propose without a struggle, but he continued doggedly, 'We lifted from Titan on plasma drive. From now on we use a different means. Come over here.'

He led her to a spot near the centre of the deck.

'Look down there.' He spoke into the air. 'Light the Cauldron, Seven-Double-Seven. Permit inspection.'

Just in front of their feet, a circular section of the deck recessed and dilated to expose a quartz window. It was dark. Slowly, however, a fist-sized ball of rosy light appeared beyond it, waxed and expanded until the entire window shone a fiery glow into their faces. Now other colours were added, green, blue and violet spiralling inwards from a rim beyond their sight, until they were looking down into a vortex which seemed to suck flowing colours from all the spectrum. In the vortex's centre a spark of intense white light grew blindingly. The aperture snapped shut.

'That's the Cauldron,' he remarked. 'Now "on the boil", as we say. Very considerable energies down there. Which I have

to re-direct to fling the orb.' He tapped his forehead. 'With my mind. PsiE. Needs effort. Concentration. That's why normally we don't carry passengers—unless they've been trained as wardens. We don't know quite why, but in the presence of an undisciplined mind we're very often struck "dumb". As we say. Unable to fling. So we have to put ordinary passengers to sleep.'

'And what,' she asked icily, 'makes you think that *I* am an "ordinary" passenger? That *my* mind is undisciplined?'

'I seem to have used the wrong word. Sorry. Meant it in a special sense. You haven't had a warden's training. That's all I meant.' He flicked another glance towards her and saw that her expression had, if anything, grown colder and more hostile, but continued relentlessly, 'So, if you don't mind, we'll put you to sleep.' He began to move towards a locker in the control console. 'I've a harmless drug here. No after effects. You'll wake refreshed.'

'I do mind.'

He halted abruptly and swung round. Her head was tilted slightly backwards and she was looking at him now with frigid hauteur. It was an attitude, he had already begun to suspect, to which she was far too prone. Alert as ever to generate heat, his temper began to glow. She might as well learn at once, he told himself sternly, that he was not the sort of man to be intimidated by it. He said tightly :

'Look. I'm the pilot of this orb. And frankly I don't care whether you mind, or not. It's time we got moving, so you'll be good enough to take the drug and no more argument.'

'You are a very ignorant and arrogant man! I have a disciplined mind—as you'll quickly discover. And I refuse absolutely to take any drug.'

'By the black deeps, you do, do you!' he roared, his temper now burning merrily, and bethought himself without further ado of his own special talent. He strode up to her, grasped her by the shoulders before she could protest and stared into her eyes. He projected his will. Almost immediately, he sensed

a resistance, a blockage, such as he had not encountered before. But it passed before he could register more than a momentary shock of surprise, then her mind was in his control.

'Sleep,' he commanded.

Her eyes closed. He shifted his grip to support her before she could fall, then, because the application of psiE required that all other forces within the orb should be neutral, ordered the paragrav to be cut. He relaxed his grip of her and left her as she was, her heels just touching the deck, her head bowed, her raven hair caressing her dark cheeks in a gentle stir of the air. The sight of her like that, so strongly contrasting her previous attitude, seemed suddenly and strangely pathetic, even appealing. He hesitated, still watching her, his temper cooling fast. And then, quite suddenly, a realization of the enormity of what he had done flooded his mind with guilt.

As distinct from hypnosis, which required some sort of co-operation from the subject, the application of mindcontrol was abrupt, instant, personal, needing only the briefest locking of glances. He had never used it for a personal end before, only during controlled experiments with volunteer subjects in the metapsychological laboratories, and some people might say he had made what was tantamount to an assault on her deepest being; from her point of view more humiliating than a physical blow. In fact, by using this talent like this he had in his rage done that very thing which his training forbade him. He had made an unprovoked—well, perhaps not so unprovoked—he had made a possibly needless mental assault on a helpless fellow being. And then a tiny doubt assailed him. Was she so helpless in fact? He remembered the momentary blockage of his invading will. He had never come across anything like that before in the metapsi labs—possibly because in them he had been operating on volunteer subjects. On the other hand, it could have been an indication that she did indeed possess the disciplined mind which she claimed.

And then, in spite of the evidence of her unmoving body, he became prey to a further doubt. Was she truly asleep? Or was she pretending—perhaps to avoid the necessity of taking the drug? In which case later there'd be trouble. He pushed himself towards her, caught her and tilted her chin. Her eyes were closed, but, to make quite sure, he pinched her arm suddenly, sharply and ruthlessly. She did not stir. He sighed with relief. But, being still troubled by his feelings of guilt, it occurred to him then that his relief was premature. For if he were to take advantage of his crime and fling the orb while she was still entranced, when he later woke her they'd be on the move and how'd he explain that? Right, he'd have to compound his crime and order her to forget the whole incident. Simple. But no, it wasn't; there'd still be a gap in her memory. Which would be hard to explain, which would need a further command, which would—no good: infinite regress. Try it her way, then, why not? He'd been much too hasty. She might, after all, have been right, her mind might not disturb him. On the other hand, prove her wrong and she'd have no further grounds for argument. She'd have to take the drug—or else. His decision reached, he addressed his orb.

'Paragrav on, Seven-Double-Seven.'

He held her on her feet as their weights returned.

'Stand,' he told her.

She stiffened, balancing on her own account. He stepped back from her.

'When you wake, you will remember that your last words to me were your refusal to take the drug. You will forget everything that happened thereafter. Wake now.'

The serenity which had curtained her tranced features instantly vanished as if it had never been. Her eyes snapped open and once again she was staring at him with frigid hauteur. He scowled back at her, then acted a shrug.

'Very well,' he said resignedly, 'if that's your attitude, I suppose I'll have to give it a try. But if I fail, will you agree to take the drug?'

'Certainly,' she said coldly.

He pointed to a handhold on the console. 'Grasp that—no paragrav while I'm flinging.' He began to turn away from her, then, hearing her utter a small gasp, looked back. She was frowning with puzzlement and rubbing at a place on her arm. 'What's wrong?'

'My arm's sore.'

That was where he had pinched her. He should have included the pain of the bruise in her forgetting. No matter. He hoped it hurt. 'Probably knocked it against the edge of the console without noticing,' he said indifferently. 'Take care you don't do it again while we're in free fall.'

'But I didn't!'

'Must have. How else could it have happened?' He turned away from her. 'Paragrav off, Seven-Double-Seven . . . Ready, Lilamani?'

'I'm ready.'

'Right.'

He turned his back on her and began to visualize the Solar System, as it were suspended between the cusps of his mind, saw his trajectory as a shaft of burning light. His visualization remained clear and true, without a foreign eddy to disturb it. He was no longer aware of her. He gathered himself, expanded his will and desire—and flung.

The orb flashed through the void, like a shot from a monstrous sling.

II—A QUESTION OF ORBIT

Maketttrig sighed and, as his custom was after the sudden intense mental effort of a fling, glanced about him, reorientating himself. Lilamani was still floating beside the console. Her expression had a withdrawn look, and though she was more or less facing him she did not seem to have registered

his small movement. With a feeling of dawning, if still unwilling, respect, he realized that she must have completely isolated herself in a world of her own; he doubted if she even saw him.

'We're on our way,' he said loudly.

She started, her glance swung wildly, then found him.

'Weight returning,' he warned her. He ordered the orb to re-impose paragrav, then became suddenly and stiffly formal in the Titanian manner. He jerked his head forward and back in his characteristic bow and said tonelessly, 'Your pardon, Lilamani Lakshman Singh. My doubt of your mental abilities was unjustified. Whatever the discipline you used, it was effective.'

She stared at him suspiciously, as if not quite sure how to take this unheralded onslaught of pomposity. Perhaps a hint of defensiveness in his expression gave her warning, for after a moment she said gravely, 'I accept your apology, Makettrig. Now let's forget the incident.'

Until next time, he added cynically to himself, but outwardly repeated his stiff little bow.

'Did you say we were moving?'

By way of reply, he beckoned her to stand before the transparency, which he had left unshuttered and which was still directed towards Titan. The disk of the satellite shrank rapidly as they watched, and then the sun flared into view from behind Saturn's limb. And tiny though its disk was at that distance, it was still too bright for his huge, sensitive eyes. He turned away, though she continued to gaze for a few seconds longer.

'The acceleration!' she exclaimed as she rejoined him. 'It must have been many gravities! Yet we seem to remain in free fall. Why weren't we crushed against the hull?'

Although she had accepted his apology gracefully, Makettrig was still smarting; he had disliked intensely what, with his upbringing, he thought of as the necessity to make it. Consequently, he was mildly grateful for the chance to lecture

her; he felt it would help to re-establish his ascendancy as pilot.

'Acceleration,' he began, 'is a term for the continuous application of force. Force applied to the surface of an object sets up stresses within it. You feel this as weight. Not so with psiE. PsiE operates on the level of the microcosm. Force is applied to each separate molecule of the orb and everything in it, ourselves included, simultaneously and equally—they all jump together in the same direction, but remaining stationary in relation to each other. No structural stress. That's why you felt nothing, why you seemed to remain in free fall, though you weren't. Now, we're in free fall. Coasting.'

'In orbit for Mercury?'

'Not precisely. Mercury will be on the far side of the sun by the time we intersect its orbit.' He glanced at her. Her expression was alert and interested. And now his heart really warmed to her. It was a continual surprise to him how little an interest people outside his profession took in the orbs; for to him these wonderful machines, exemplifying as they did both mental and material disciplines, were the epitome of the sciences of his race. He said, 'I'll show you, if you like.'

He led her into the centre of the circular control console and spoke to the impersonal air.

'Raise the plotting tank, Seven-Double-Seven.'

A section of the deck recessed and slid aside and a large circular tank rose silently. It was transparent and lidless and filled, not quite to the brim, with a greenish cloudily translucent gel.

'Indicate our present position in relation to Mercury, Seven-Double-Seven.'

The cloudiness swirled, dissolved; the tank seemed to become void and it was as if they were looking through a hole into a space with no stars. Then at the very edge of the tank a brilliant green spark appeared, and diametrically opposite it, near the farther rim, a cluster of five globes of unequal

size. Four of the globes glowed with a blue light, but the smallest shone with the same green as the spark.

Maketrig pointed to the spark. 'Us. Over there, the Sun, Mars, Earth, Venus. Mercury's the green one. To scale, except that their diameters are stepped up, or we'd need a microscope. Now.' He slid out a tray in the console, took out slim, delicate-looking prongs, with them selected a tiny bead from a number in the tray and inserted it into the tank until it was almost touching the green globe. He released it. 'Record and compute, Seven-Double-Seven.' The bead shifted very slightly, then remained suspended in the gel.

'It moved,' she remarked.

'Safety device. Seven-Double-Seven must have computed I had put it within the Zone of Prohibition. The Cauldron Fields are affected by mass. Light a Cauldron too near a mass above a certain critical size and it explodes. Catastrophically. The larger the mass, the greater the volume of the danger zone surrounding it. We call it the Zone of Prohibition—you overheard Seven-Double-Seven telling me we'd passed out of Titan's Zone shortly after we lifted off, remember? The Cauldron's automatically dowsed before entering a Zone, so I shall have to reverse the fling before entering Mercury's and transfer to plasma drive. For the rest, if I've flung truly—and I must have, or Seven-Double-Seven would have warned me—the orb'll make all minor course corrections by means of the plasma drive.'

'Do you leave the choice of orbit to this machine?'

'I could do. If we were going faster than this, it'd be wise to do so.'

'So you can go faster! Then why don't you?'

'Deceleration. Manoeuvrability. Our present velocity is the result of one fling. I can kill it instantly by reversing the fling. I could increase it in finite jumps by a series of flings, but then, equally, I'd have to kill it by a series of reverses. Which takes time.'

'But if you choose a suitable orbit, is there any need for

such caution?—an orbit at ninety degrees to the ecliptic would render any danger of collision almost negligible. It would avoid the asteroid belt.'

'An orbit at ninety degrees to the ecliptic,' he repeated slowly. 'Ye-es.' He glanced at her from out of the sides of his eyes. In his enthusiasm to explain the navigation of an orb, he had quite forgotten his private instructions, but so far there was no trace of suspicion in her expression. 'You came that way, I heard,' he said cautiously.

She nodded.

He had already come to the conclusion that she was a skilled space pilot. Therefore it would be pointless to try to hide his intended orbit from her. In fact, it might make things worse. He assumed a suavely casual air, which was so unlike his manner till now that it merely led her to give him a suddenly frowning look, though this he seemed not to notice. He waved his hand negligently.

'You'll notice that Venus is just past conjunction with Earth. So at this period an orbit in the ecliptic enables a fly past of both planets, with only minor course corrections. Like this.'

He selected two further beads and with almost ostentatiously finicky precision inserted them into the gel. She studied the display silently for some seconds, then turned to him. He braced himself for another scene. Yet, to his surprise, he saw that her expression showed resignation, rather than anger, and a certain deep anxiety as well.

'I suppose I should have expected this. Your superiors wouldn't waste a journey and I can't say I blame them, things being as they are. You've been told to scout out what you can, I expect. But I trust there's no question of landing on either planet—or is there?'

He had always thought those private instructions needlessly sly; for to a woman such as her they were bound to have become obvious, once he had disclosed his course. Yet perhaps they had been wise, in a way, for if she had been consulted beforehand, it looked as if she might well have insisted on

returning the way she had come. He shook his head slowly. 'No, I've not been ordered to land.'

'That's something. Is it any use warning you that our—that if they've heard of this mission my enemies will try to delay us? This can only add to the danger. In that orbit, they could detect us. And intercept. Please believe me, the risk isn't worth it for the little you'll be able to learn from a mere fly past.'

'Risk?' He laughed reassuringly. 'There isn't any! Let them try to intercept. Their ships may have the advantage of size and armament—but not speed! Why, our momentum, after only one fling, would take them days of continuous high acceleration to achieve. There's nothing that can catch an orb—except another. And they haven't got any—nor the pilots to fly them, if they had. In fact, I can think of only one situation when I'd be unhappy to be caught in an orb. But we needn't worry about that!'

She looked at him steadily. 'As it doesn't need a detailed knowledge to guess what that is, I hope you mean what you say!'

III—BODY CONTROL

They had been in flight for several days now and Makettrig was feeling faintly bored. He was not quite sure why; but he found himself wishing that his instructions had permitted him to fling to higher velocities in a trajectory above the plane of the ecliptic. The mood was a new experience for him, for there were many ways in which he could employ himself during a coasting flight. He was something of an astronomer, for example, as all wardens had to be, and the sights which the telescopes and light amplification devices of his orb displayed for him gave him unceasing wonder; the near view of a planet swinging by the unshuttered transparency could cause him to

stand enraptured. Then, since by Titanian standards he was still very young, there was his education to continue and Seven-Double-Seven's crystal brain was both reference library and tutor. His spiritual exercises and meditations, also, brought him a sometimes hard-earned joy, for in spite of his bias against entering the priesthood, wardens were nevertheless part way there. And as for his lighter moments, a visi-reader and viewer were built into the control console, each with a catholic selection of play and book tablets. It occurred to him then that Lilamani might have something to do with his mood; for there was little doubt that her presence in the orb made him feel shy of occupying himself in certain of the ways to which he was used, some of which might cause her to wonder.

She herself had been in an odd mood this last day or two, sometimes talking gaily, sometimes almost morosely silent. And on several occasions, when she thought he was not looking, he had caught her in the act of watching him, with a puzzled frown sometimes, but at others almost angrily. She had retired to her cubicle an hour or so ago, having fallen into one of her silences. He considered leaving her undisturbed, but he was beginning to feel hungry.

He wandered to the foot of the ladder leading up to her cubicle. Her door was ajar.

'I thought of eating now,' he called up to her. 'Interested?'

She appeared promptly and stepped briskly down to him. His glance went to her forehead. He had noticed that she did not wear her skull emblem consistently and this time she had left it off. And evidently she was in a happier frame now, for she said smilingly :

'You must have been reading my mind. I'm starving.'

He went to a part of the control console which was devoid of instrumentation and pressed buttons. The usual aperture dilated and a tray appeared bearing utensils and oblongs of the jelly-like Titanian food. She began to eat her portion with relish.

He said, 'I'm glad you like it.'

'Why shouldn't I?'

He shrugged. 'That man with a tin heart. Ngala. He didn't—they eat meat on Earth, apparently,' he added with disgust, then bethought himself and continued quickly, 'But perhaps you eat it on Mercury too.'

She shook her head firmly. 'Your culture and mine have points in common.'

They ate in silence for some moments. Suddenly she looked up at him and said a trifle hesitantly, 'I notice you never speak about your foster sister. Forgive me—but . . . Is it perhaps because she's something more to you than a sister and you're sad to have left her behind?'

Instantly, his expression hardened. He said stiffly, 'I'd rather we didn't discuss her.'

She studied him for a moment or two, then said, 'I see that my question was impertinent. Makettrig, I am sorry.'

Then she did a strangely beautiful thing; for, having put down her spoon, she stepped swayingly back with one foot, leaving the other advanced, joined her palms in front of her face and slowly bowed from the waist. He guessed it was a formal gesture, as his on a similar occasion had been; yet it was charming and graceful, like a step from a dance. He felt his frigid reserve melt swiftly away and said as gravely as she had that other time :

'I accept your apology, Lilamani Lakshman Singh.'

As slowly and deliberately as she had bowed, she straightened herself and let her hands fall to her sides. And he saw by a certain hooded look in her eyes that his response had not fully requited her. Perhaps in making that obeisance to him, he thought, she had humbled herself more than he realized. But what else could he say, without telling her about Lydia? Well, it was all over, so why shouldn't he? He turned away from her pensively to stand in his characteristic attitude before the transparency, his feet astraddle, his hands clasped behind his back.

The subject of Lydia had not been mentioned between them since that first conversation and, in fact, no thought even of her had entered his mind for the past several days. Why had she brought the subject up now? Because of his reference to Ngala? He continued to think about Lydia, remembering his sudden feeling of guilty relief when she had declined him. He certainly had no regrets now. So why had he reacted so strongly to Lilamani's question? It had been an impertinence, perhaps, but . . . Then he remembered Lydia's final scornful taunt. But, he told himself, in spite of it, he needn't feel any shame in that direction. He came to a decision and returned to Lilamani.

'I was curt with you. I'm sorry.' He shrugged. 'Silly of me. It's over now. No regrets. But I went to Mimas that day to ask her to marry me. She didn't seem to like the idea.' He grinned. 'And as a matter of fact—now that I've had time to think about it—nor do I!'

She gave him a piercing look and said shrewdly, 'I think she must have said something which hurt you deeply.'

He laughed with involuntary bitterness. 'Suppose it did at the time.' Lydia's scornful expression returned to him vividly and he added in a lower tone half to himself, 'She called me a neuter.'

Lilamani's eyes widened. 'A neuter!'

He smiled wryly. 'Some truth in it.'

'Makettrig, you look like a man to me.'

She was watching him expectantly and he saw that he had gone too far to avoid giving her a full explanation, without seeming to snub her. Yet, as he had told himself earlier, he had no need to feel ashamed—the opposite rather. He returned to his position in front of the transparency and keeping his back to her said, 'I suppose you're aware that by means of various bioengineering techniques my race has changed itself in several ways?'

'I've noticed you differ in physique from Earthmen. I'd assumed that was because you live in a lighter gravity, like us.'

'Not so. Dwarfs are more comfortable than giants in caves. Also in space ships. So, as we're in process of becoming a space-roving race, we've limited our mass. On the other hand, we've given ourselves strong hearts and muscles—stronger than those of Earthmen. Much. And because we live so far from the sun, we've adapted our eyes accordingly. Above all, we've made ourselves long-lived.'

At this point his whole manner began to change noticeably, as if he were isolating himself on some mental platform.

'This,' he continued, but now in the precise, dispassionate tones of a lecturer, 'has made population control a vital necessity. The problem has been attacked in various ways. On Ganymede, they have removed their visual stimulus which is the chief cause of desire in males. Their women have voluntary control over their secondary sexual characteristics, and only display them when they intend to procreate. They call it the Change. They claim it is a very profound spiritual and emotional experience. You saw some of their women on Mimas and probably thought they were boys. But this system has certain disadvantages. Because when their men meet women of other races, as they have tended to do more and more recently, certain complications arise—'

Hearing her make a choking, spluttering sound, he broke off and swung round to stare at her suspiciously. But she had recovered her composure sufficiently to meet his glance blandly.

'Please go on,' she said a little breathlessly. 'This is fascinating.'

He stared at her for a moment or so longer, then turned back to the stars, as if in them, at least, he had an audience whose serious attention merited his dissertation.

'So far,' he continued, and now his voice had become, if anything, even more remote, 'we on Titan have kept to the traditional methods: systemic agents, inter-uterine devices, so on. This has the disadvantage that it tends to encourage promiscuity—which in our experience has always degraded society. On the premise that the male has the greater tend-

ency to promiscuity than the female, therefore, a new experiment in bioengineering has recently begun. Certain of our males have been given complete voluntary control over their reproductive system. They only feel desire as a result of a deliberate and conscious act of will. In them the sexual act has been relegated totally to the function for which it was intended—the creation of children.'

Now, slowly, as if he found some difficulty in forcing himself to it, even though he had already twice reassured himself that no shame accrued, he turned round and faced her squarely.

'I,' he said tonelessly, 'am such a one.'

She gaped at him, and this time at least there was no sign of levity in her expression. 'So that's why you've never shown —' She broke off with a gasp. 'No wonder that girl refused you!'

His brows came together. 'Is mere carnality so important? You seem to have your values wrong.'

'Have I indeed!' She was looking at him now with a mixture of horror and pity and sheer incredulity. 'There's a great deal more than just procreation in the love of a man for a woman. But you wouldn't know about that, my poor Makettrig. Because you haven't yet felt desire, have you?'

'I have not.'

'Not even for your foster sister?'

Her expression and her pitying, almost scornful tone were like sparks to the tinder of his temper and a respectable conflagration began to sizzle within him. His scowl deepened and he said gratingly, 'I would have on the proper occasion.'

'Proper occasion! . . . I wonder if you'd ever have brought yourself to it . . .' Her voice trailed and a new expression began gradually to curtain her features, part speculative, part sly, wholly wicked. She gave him a slow smile. 'On my world, they say I have some beauty. What do you say, Makettrig?'

He let his glance wander over her coldly. Her skin was dark; but it had a satiny texture. Her eyes were narrower

than he was accustomed to; but a tilt at their outer corners gave the lids a graceful line, hinting at the exotic. Her hair was thick and glossy. She was slim, gracefully built, and her bone structure had the same delicacy which showed in his own race. Suspiciously, wondering what she was up to now, but prepared to concede what he had already conceded to the hologram of her, he returned his glance to hers.

'Aesthetically, you're pleasing to look at, if that's what you're after.'

'Why, thank you, Makettrig!' she said ironically. 'From you, I feel that must be a compliment indeed!' She breathed deeply for some seconds, and then to his concealed astonishment relaxed, her whole attitude changing. She smiled at him again, again without humour, slowly, her eyes glinting. 'My poor Makettrig.' Her voice had taken on a husky, purring quality. 'Look at me, Makettrig.' Her glance caught and held his. She made a writhing, undulating movement with her whole body, then became still, and he could not take his gaze from her shining eyes.

At first he was conscious only of puzzlement, mixed with faint disgust. But then he began to feel something happening within him; felt an activity rise swiftly from his deeps to take him unawares. He saw the swell of her breasts, saw how her nipples jutted firmly through the soft, clinging stuff of her tunic—and knew what he saw. He began to find it necessary to fight a desperate battle with himself—to no effect, for a turmoil of feeling irrupted in him, sweeping aside his separate will, and there was fire in his loins. Flames seemed to lap him and he flushed and his knees trembled. He began a small movement towards her.

'Ah. So you *are* a man, Makettrig.'

The triumph in her voice went some way to release him. He jerked, like a man in a dream. Then awareness of what she was doing to him began to seep through his bewitchment and a sense of deep outrage flared in him, consuming the lesser fires, singeing away his silken bonds.

He continued his movement towards her, but this time to grasp her by the shoulders and glare into her eyes. And if ever she had doubted his boast of Titanian strength, now she could not, for his fingers bit into her flesh like talons. For a moment he nearly succumbed to the temptation to use his talent and sear her mind with his anger; instead, he began to shake her, so violently that her head jerked to and fro and her teeth rattled. And between each raging paroxysm he spat words furiously.

'I don't know how you did it . . . but if you try that trick on me again . . . so help me the One, I'll maroon you on the first orbiting rock I can find . . . and leave you to rot in cold storage!'

She gave a chattering moan. 'Stop it! Please stop! You're hurting me so.'

He flung her from him.

And only then was he able to play the beam of his conscious will among the seething turbulence of his body chemistry. The fires died. He looked at her. She stood with her hands clasping her shoulders and her eyes were glistening. But he felt no pity; he still felt too strongly outraged for that—and also something of fear. For, though it had not been anything like his own mindcontrol, somehow she had knowingly and deliberately overridden his will to take control of his bodily functions and stimulate his glands to enslave him. He continued to glare at her.

She remained as she was, her hands massaging her shoulders and a strangely pleading look in her still glistening eyes.

Chapter Four

I—FIVE KILOMEGAHERZ

DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG!

The brassy clangour rang round the control chamber, abrupt, demanding, in total contrast to the sweet chimes of the orb's more normal call for attention. Makettrig swung round from his customary position in front of the transparency and leaped for the control console. He cast his glance along a line of instruments and relaxed slightly, looking coldly to where Lilamani was standing, rather despondently, by herself.

'Prepare to isolate yourself,' he said harshly. 'For a longish time, perhaps. Can you?'

'I can. What's wrong?'

'Nothing immediate, but we're still in the asteroid belt.' He scanned the instruments again. 'Report, Seven-Double-Seven.'

'Electromagnetic radiation,' the orb's soft tones replied. 'Five kilomegahertz for one tenth second. No repeat.'

'Source?'

'Observe Screen Two.'

Makettrig turned towards a group of six screens, together giving a spherical view. Screen One by convention was always switched to the sensor in the forward quadrant, Screen Two, he therefore knew, covered a view in the plane of the ecliptic at ninety degrees to his trajectory: a web of night bedewed with brilliance. The stars apart, there was no planet, no other object of any magnitude immediately apparent, but a grid of fine, faintly glowing lines superimposed itself as he watched.

'Right Ascension, seventy; Declination, minus ten,' the orb said.

Maketttrig's glance travelled over the grid, found a tiny, shining arrow. Its tip was not quite touching a point of light so faint as to be almost invisible.

'Distance?'

'Four hundred thousand kilometres.'

'Magnify.'

The scene exploded, stars streaking outwards, and the faint object swooped towards him, expanding, until it nearly filled the screen: a dark, roughly cylindrical mass, slightly less than a half of it dimly lit by the still distant sun. From the black deeps of innumerable chasms criss-crossing the lit half rock faces jabbed upwards at every angle, slicing blades of light into the miniature Terminator. The lines of a scale blinked into being.

'One and a half kilometres by a half, about,' Maketttrig observed dispassionately. 'Floran Group asteroid. Probably never even been named. Thousands of them.'

As they watched, shining rock faces dimmed, blacked out, while other new shapes seemed to grow into the light.

'Revolving round its shorter axis,' Maketttrig said.

'Even I can see that.'

They had maintained a frigid silence between each other ever since their scene together and her tone reflected the situation. He glanced at her askance. A raven lock curtained her cheek; but her eyes gleamed coldly and even the crystals in the golden skull, which she had taken to wearing again, seemed to beam an accusing glint. He forced his tone to remain calmly professional.

'The radiation source is probably on the surface. Caught it just before it passed over the horizon, probably.'

'If it is still radiating.'

'Nevertheless, we'll keep the asteroid under observation while it completes a revolution.' He spoke into the air. 'Com-

ply, Seven-Double-Seven . . . And meanwhile, we might as well have some food while we can.'

Studiously avoiding her, studiously looking in every direction but at her, he caused food and utensils to appear and offered them. She ignored them, placing herself in front of him to look him firmly in the eyes.

'Warden Makettrig, we can't go on like this. It's childish. Either you apologise and behave like a civilized being, or this mission must come to an end and we return to Titan.'

Makettrig glared at her, his temper beginning to seethe. Nevertheless, in the face of that threat he kept a tight control of himself for once, while his thoughts churned.

Shortly after their scene, the orb had begun to enter the asteroid belt and he had had to remain alert in the control console for much of the time—which to some extent had disguised the situation between them. However, there had been long periods during which he could relax, when, he could not deny, she had made more than one attempt to heal the breach between them. But the memory of what she had done to him had continued to make him shiver and he had continued to . . . sulk? So now she was threatening to end the mission. He was the pilot; she couldn't force him to turn back. But presumably she had the power to have him recalled as an Envoy, if he tried to call her bluff. And somehow he didn't think she was the sort of woman who would bluff. He wanted to go on—for the sake of his raging curiosity about the mission as much as anything else; but there was also the problem of what his superiors and, in particular, his uncle would say when they learned that through his apparent mismanagement they had lost this chance of liaison between the two worlds.

But apologise to her? After what she had done to him? After she had bypassed his own command of his own most private functions in the full stare of his consciousness! For that was what she had done, the One knew how.

'Why should I apologise to you?' he growled.

'You manhandled me. You hurt me.'

'You know why. You did worse.'

'Did I?'

She gave him a veiled look and perhaps her head moved slightly, for his glance wandered involuntarily to the crystal eyes in the golden skull on her forehead, and he found himself wondering at a tangent why she had taken to wearing the thing again so consistently. Though it did seem to add to her dignity. Odd.

'Did I?' she repeated. **'If that's what you truly think, then perhaps I did wrong you. So shall I say sorry first?'**

Without waiting for his reaction, she joined her palms in front of her face and made him the same sweeping bow that she had before.

'I apologise, Warden Makettrig.'

Although he was still feeling angry, he could not help again being touched by the charm of that graceful gesture. She straightened, waiting for his response. Yet for some seconds he remained standing stiffly and her expression began to harden. Then, abruptly, he jerked his head forward and back.

'Your pardon, Lilamani Lakshman Singh.'

'Thank you, Makettrig. That caused you an effort, didn't it?' She smiled suddenly, putting her head slightly to one side. **'I like your little bow.'**

But now his attention was once again distracted by the milkily luminescent crystals in the golden skull—they were becoming something of an obsession, he thought.

'Why do you wear that thing?'

'Why do you ask, Makettrig?'

He shrugged. **'Just curious, that's all. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't.'**

'Don't you think it becomes me?'

'Oh, if it's only an ornament . . . We'd better eat.'

They completed their meal in silence, but in a friendlier atmosphere than had existed between them for some time, then re-entered the circle of the control console together.

In Screen Two the asteroid now presented a roughly circular shape.

'If there's anything radiating there, we should be hearing it soon,' he commented.

The image continued to change as the asteroid revolved. The gibbous disk of its sunlit surface elongated, like a finger slowly uncurling; the faces of its turning rocks reflected the sun's attenuated rays like dim, languid flames. The silence continued.

'Seven-Double-Seven,' Makettrig said suddenly, 'probe for an energy source. Report.'

There was an appreciable interval, then, 'Negative.'

Lilamani had grown tense. 'What were you expecting?'

'Fusion bottle. On Inner Planet craft they're larger than ours and not so well shielded. Should be detectable, even at this range.'

The image on the screen, its shape still slowly changing, was once more nearly cylindrical.

'Receiving transmission,' the orb's voice announced without warning and was instantly succeeded by an eldritch wailing.

AY-EE-AY-EE-AY-EE . . .

Makettrig froze. 'That's a distress signal,' he said with sudden urgency. 'We'll have to change course.'

'Makettrig, no! Ever since you insisted on this orbit, I've been expecting something like this. It may be a trap.'

'Didn't you hear me? Distress signal. Someone's in trouble on that chunk of rock. We can't ignore it. Get ready. I'm going to reverse, re-flying, reverse.'

II—RECONNAISSANCE

Through the transparency, the asteroid loomed like a small mountain, perhaps half a kilometre distant now, its rugged

surface wholly filling the view and rent by a complex of fissures and chasms among which the higher massifs seemed to float like islands, dully gleaming: a scene much the same as the screen had shown them, but with a slight difference, for at this range faint streaks of colour showed here and there.

'Minerals,' Makettrig remarked with sudden interest. 'I'll have to report that—the asteroid belt's something of a no man's land and we're short of metals.'

But that held no interest for Lilamani. 'I can't see anything like a ship, or a dome.'

'In shadow, probably . . . Report, Seven-Double-Seven.'

'Radiation ceased one-point-two seconds before your final reverse. No detectable energy source.'

'Shielded from us again—orbit in the plane of the long axis, Seven-Double-Seven.'

A faint whine sounded in the control chamber as the orb applied its plasma drive, then ceased. The jagged rocks on the surface of the asteroid tilted and began to swing by in lazy procession.

'Receiving transmission,' the orb's voice announced abruptly.

'Lock on and match.'

Again the whine, again the rocks tilted, then their slow march past the transparency came to a gentle halt and Makettrig found himself looking down on an area where two large ravines intercepted to form roughly the shape of a Y. But still there was no form, no discernible shadow alien to that desolate scene. He returned to the screens, Lilamani following.

'Magnify, Seven-Double-Seven.'

The picture of a nearly vertical face of smooth, shining rock swelled, and with it the chasm from whose black depths it sprang; the screen became a dichotomy of light and dark, no further shape, however, showing.

'Infra-red.'

The rock face brightened, grew downwards, its image eating into the lower darkness, until again it merged with the depths.

But now a few dim points of light showed where perhaps lesser heights thrusting up from the floor of the ravine remembered the sun.

'There's something there, all right,' Makettrig said suddenly.

He pointed to a faint circular patch, slightly separated from the image of the shining cliff. He stared at it frowningly.

'Still not enough to guess what it is,' he muttered. Then decisively, 'There's only one way to find out.'

He ordered the orb to display the area in its plotting tank, including itself. The green cloudiness of the gel swirled and cleared, leaving the tank almost three quarters filled by what could have been a section of spiky boulder, heavily cracked and seamed. A translucent tegument of reddish light encased it, without obscuring its surface detail. Hovering over an easily recognizable Y-shaped crack, but well clear of the redness, a tiny replica of the orb glowed greenly.

'The red's the Zone of Prohibition,' he explained. 'Wider than I'd expected—comparatively massive, that thing—the ore in it, I expect. I'd hoped we'd be able to edge in a little closer, before dowsing the Cauldron.'

'Surely you don't mean to land in the orb itself!' she said urgently.

'Of course. We'll need its equipment for a rescue operation. Almost certainly.'

'But we've space suits on board. And don't you carry body rockets for emergencies? Wouldn't it be wise for one of us to reconnoitre first?'

'I'd go down willingly, except that it would be pointless. You can't fling. If it really is a trap and they catch me, you'll be stuck.'

'But *I* can go down!' Then seeing his sudden startlement settle into obstinacy, she said impatiently, 'Don't be silly, Makettrig. You wouldn't hesitate a second with a female warden.'

'Sex has nothing to do with it. You're in my charge.'

'So are you in mine—little as you realize. You're wanted

on Mercury—no, I won't answer questions. You have your faults, my red-headed fire-eater, but I'd trust you. You'll go on without me, if it comes to that. Won't you?' He did not answer, but she nodded to herself as if he had and continued briskly, 'Be sensible. Take the orb down and you risk us both. Come. We're wasting time. You said it yourself, there may be somebody in trouble down there. Where are the suits?'

He still hesitated. Yet what she had said made such sense that he could find no further argument. And in truth he did not think he would be sending her into any particular danger. He turned to the equipment locker, extricated their suits, a rocket and harness.

They suited up. He strapped the rocket and harness on to her and explained its simple controls. 'But don't touch them till you have to,' he ended. 'Seven-Double-Seven will vector you down.' He returned to the locker and took out a further object. 'Hand gun. Laser type. Just in case. Used one before? No? Then point *this* end at the target. Press *this* button to fire. Keep pressing and hose and you'll hit. Right, helmets.'

Their helmets on, he ordered the orb to decompress its atmosphere and dilate the port. They stood for a moment together looking out on the asteroid, then she thrust herself away.

Her rocket fired.

He stayed at the port, watching her figure dwindle, until all that remained to his sight was the flare of her rocket, like a firefly drifting down. And in spite of all his logic he knew anxiety and a sudden little crowd of thoughts about her invaded his mind. In her charge, she had said—another little fact to add to his slender store. Had his faults, had he? She could speak! Haughty at times, self-willed always; yet certainly brave; and probably honest—in spite of that sly use of her talent. A strange talent that. Possibly analogous to the power of self-healing which he with all wardens had, it was still a mystery compounding the mystery of this whole mission . . . Could she be right in suspecting a trap? So far from

Earth, not to say Mercury, it seemed highly unlikely. But could she be right? He turned away from the port abruptly and returned to the screen, which was still on infra red, still displaying that enigmatic, circular patch of luminosity at the base of the shining cliff. He spoke into the intercom.

'Superimpose gun-sight, Seven-Double-Seven . . . Hear that, Lilamani?'

'I heard. What took you so long?'

At that moment a tiny spark appeared on the edge of the screen.

'Waiting for you to enter this sensor's field,' he replied mendaciously.

He manipulated the gun controls with a delicate touch and the quartered circle of the sight tracked, centred on the luminous patch, held steady. He waited, watching tautly as the bright spark drifted across the screen, nearer and nearer the target. Now only a very small gap remained. Suddenly, the spark jinked, winked out. Instantly, his fingers tensed.

'Report, Lilamani, report!'

'Wait,' her voice replied calmly. Then after some seconds it continued with long pauses between sentences. 'I'm down—didn't want to land on top of the thing . . . Lost it . . . It's so dark here, too many rocks . . . That cliff gives some light . . . I'll have to jump—'

'Take care how you do,' he interposed. 'You can leap clean away from a body that size.'

'Don't worry . . . Ah, beautiful! Like flying—there it is . . . Space ship of some sort . . . One end's buckled . . . other's jammed between rocks—there's a light! Observation port, I think . . . Can't reach it, my gloves slip. Where's the air lock? . . . that could be it—Makettrig, it's jammed behind one of the rocks. The crew's sealed it.'

'Stay where you are. I'm coming down . . . Seven-Double-Seven, douse the Cauldron.'

III—REQUIREMENT FOR SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

The orb was dwarfed to the size of a marble amongst that sterile chaos. The sheer rock of the cliff flowed slowly up past the transparency, so close now that in the glare of it the pupils of Makettrig's huge eyes were contracted to pinpricks. He ordered the orb to rotate through ninety degrees. The cliff began to angle away, flat, straight, two-dimensional, irrelevant, sundered from its roots by the notched shadow of the ravine's opposite wall. Yet in itself it was a lamp for that other side, which, in contrast, was much broken, flawed with chimneys and ledges, while here and there rock pillars leaned before it like weary sentinels forever on patrol, forever on the brink of an exhausted toppling. But he had seen similar scenes of timeless disaster on other worldlets.

The ravine, at this height about two hundred metres wide, was narrowing rapidly. He returned to the control console and Number Six screen, in which the orb's searchlight showed a sharply outlined section of the ravine floor. It was filled from wall to wall with a jumble of jagged rocks, ranging in size from hillocks to stones, sometimes piled in slender pyramids which on any larger body would have collapsed in a trice, and he knew it would be dangerous to land the orb among such a suspended cataclysm where its not inconsiderable mass might re-start ancient history in slow, grinding motion. He hoped there would be no need. In the savage division of light and shade the craft below was totally camouflaged and he saw Lilamani first, and then only because in that frozen stillness she was the only thing moving. She was waving. He carried his glance down from her gloves to her boots and saw that she was standing on a rounded surface, too smooth to be anything but a hull.

The orb continued to sink. At a height of five metres above her, he ordered it to hover and lower its flexible ladder. Grasping a rung as it extruded from a slot beneath the still open port, he floated down to a feather-soft landing beside her.

The crashed machine, he was now able to see, was in the shape of an ill-balanced dumbbell, lying the length of the ravine: two spheres of unequal size joined by a long cylindrical column—a standard design among Inner Planet craft, as he knew. They were standing on the larger, the crew sphere; the other would house the plasma drive and fusion bottle. And though for an Inner Planet machine it was small, the hull they were standing on was at least ten metres larger in diameter than his orb. Lilamani pointed at wedges of rock jutting out from the ravine walls on either side.

‘The hull’s dented there and there,’ she said over the intercom. ‘But not holed, I think. Air lock’s jammed behind that one. Observation port in the bow.’

Still holding the ladder, Makettrig slid himself over the sphere’s minuscule horizon. A metre or two down, his face plate came level with a curving length of transparent material, flush with the hull, and he found himself looking in on a wedge-shaped control chamber. It was dimly lighted from a source in the ceiling beyond his line of sight, probably part of an emergency system, but enough to show the back rests of two chairs projecting above the top of a large, rectangular console. The chairs were empty and the console obscured the greater part of the floor. Then his glance was held by something projecting beyond one of the console’s edges at floor level. He shifted his position. Yes, a sandalled foot. He rapped his glove against the hull. The foot remained still. He returned to Lilamani, pointed upwards, and they hauled themselves back into the orb.

‘We’ll have to cut our way in,’ he said.

‘But their atmosphere?’

‘We carry special equipment for this sort of thing.’

He gave the orb a series of rapid orders. It withdrew its

ladder, rotated until its open port was facing the machine below and descended until it was hovering some centimetres above the other hull. A metaplast collar extruded from a circular slot round the edge of the port, there was a pause, then :
'Air-tight seal effected. Atmosphere resumed.'

Maketrig fetched a torch and a cutter from the equipment locker. 'Equalize atmospheres as necessary,' he ordered. He adjusted the beam of the cutter and rapidly burned a small hole through the other hull. He waited, saying aside to Lilamani : 'If there's anyone alive in there they'll find our air a bit thin—didn't you at first?'

'No—I told you we had points in common.'

'Atmosphere equalized,' the orb reported. A pause, then, 'No fall in pressure.'

Maketrig applied the cutter again, gave a thump with his fist and a disk of metal disappeared into the space below. He shone his torch and found himself looking down through the ceiling of a narrow cabin, containing a bunk with sheets and pillow, a stool, locker, mirror, basin and taps—evidence that this ship, like most Inner Planet vessels, maintained paragrav journey-long with its field in the plane of flight. Otherwise it was empty and its sliding door was open.

'Safe enough to unsuit,' he said.

They divested themselves. He handed the torch to her then cautiously lowered himself to the extent of his arms, for Inner Planet paragrav fields had a strength of one G, as against the orb's one sixth, and he could not tell whether this one was functioning until he came within its influence. He let himself drop. In the event he fell slowly, to bounce lazily on the bunk's springs. He steadied himself, then reached up and guided her down.

They left the cabin, entering a narrow passageway. To the left, it was dark, but to the right a doorway was dimly outlined. They passed through it and into the control chamber which he had viewed from outside. Their swiftly searching glances itemized : two swivel chairs bolted to the deck ; a

cluster of dials and switches; the control console; and, lastly only because it was more than part hidden by the chairs and in the dim light its attitude somewhat disguised it, a crouching figure. Makettrig stepped up to it. It was on its knees, its forehead touching the floor and one hand clutching the edge of a chair seat, as if in the act of making one last effort to rise. The floor about its head was gory. He lifted the head gently, then dropped it, his glance travelling to a smear of blood on a sharp edge of the console nearby.

'Dead,' he said laconically. He pointed to the figure's blue toga-like garment. 'Earth-fashion. They age quickly, so I'd say he was still young . . .' His glance quested towards her, as if a sudden thought had struck him.

If the same thought had also occurred to her, she gave no sign, but pointed to a glowing pilot light.

'The transmitter?' she said urgently.

' . . . Yes, you're right. It's done its job . . .

He reversed a switch and they returned to the passage. A door on the right opened into an unlit cabin. His torch showed that it was similar to the first and also empty; but the sheet on its bunk was folded back, the pillow slightly indented, and there was a faint fragrance in the air. There was no light in the neighbouring cabin either, but his torch beam found its occupant almost immediately—asprawl on the floor. The beam wandered on, disclosing a shower, a waste disposal unit, a locker with its door slid open and the word MEDICAL stencilled above, then returned to the figure. Its eyes were shut, but its chest was moving gently. He stooped, recovered an instrument lying beside it and examined it. A pointer on a dial was set half-way between two self-explanatory low relief pictographs.

'Hypodermic spray. Mis-set in the dark, probably. Gave himself a general instead of a local anaesthetic.'

A faint note, not entirely of amusement, entered Lilamani's voice. 'Himself? *Herself*, I fancy.'

His eyebrows shot up and he began to stoop again.

'Don't touch her yet,' she said sharply. 'Turn the torch on her legs . . . Yes. Fractured. She must have been in great pain—are there splints in that locker?'

There were and between them they set and splinted the broken limb. Then leaving the woman temporarily they continued their search. A hemispherical cargo space below the deck contained some rock samples and what appeared to be mining, or prospecting, equipment; but for the rest there was nothing of interest, no sign of further crew members. They returned to the woman. She was still unconscious.

'You know what this means, of course,' Makettrig said grimly.

'I'm afraid I do.'

'Still think it's a trap?'

'If it isn't it's a very unfortunate coincidence at best.'

IV—REQUIREMENT FOR SPECIAL TALENTS

They were in space again, drifting beyond the Zone of Prohibition. As much for the sake of the woman's leg as in readiness for the fling, Makettrig had left the paragrav off and she and Lilamani were floating side by side in the centre of the control chamber. Lilamani was staring fixedly at the other and there was something about her stillness which roused a memory he still found disturbing.

'What are you doing?'

She paid him no attention, remaining still, until at length she sighed and stretched herself in the air. She turned her head to look at him without expression.

'What did you think I was doing, Makettrig?'

'You tell me.'

'I've been healing her.'

'*Healing* her?'

'Have you no healers on Titan?'

Healers? he asked himself. All wardens, of course, were trained early to a form of mental control over their own healing processes which speeded things up, so that they seldom, if ever, needed medical attention. But they couldn't help others. Did she mean she could? In some analogous manner? In the light of her interference with his body chemistry that time, it was possible . . .

'Not in the sense I think you mean,' he said slowly. 'But wardens can heal themselves, and remembering what you did to me, I can believe you.' He gave her a sour look.

She met his glance squarely. 'Makettrig, that time I hurt your pride, nothing else. And I made my apology.'

For once, he found himself disinclined to outstare her. Instead, he nodded towards the woman. 'How is she? Still unconscious? Can I fling?'

'She's recovering.'

He propelled himself to hover beside them as the woman's eyes flickered open. Her glance encountered his, at first blankly, then with startlement. Her gaze switched aside to Lilamani's face, then returned to his and her brows came together.

'You are white,' she said with evident, if unconscious contempt. Her glance wandered again. 'What is this place?'

'You're in my orb,' he said rather more curtly than he might otherwise have done.

'Orb? Orb?' She looked round her wildly. 'Mzuri?' she said suddenly and on a rising note. 'Where is Mzuri?'

Lilamani said gently, 'If that's the name of the other person who was on your ship, then I'm afraid I have to tell you he was already dead by the time we arrived.'

'Dead? Mzuri dead?' Then quite visibly her full memory returned to her. 'Oh . . . He hit his head! Nothing I could do!' Her face crumpled and her eyes began to glisten. 'Mzuri . . . Oh, Mzuri . . .'

They waited silently while she slowly regained control of herself. Then looking about her again, she said :

'Please. Where have you put him? May I see him please?'

Makettrig said, 'We left the body where we found it. You're on a Titanian battle orb now.'

'Titanian?' Her glance searched round her again, and now at last she seemed to realize that she was in a foreign vessel, for it returned to his face and she repeated, 'Titanian,' at the same time nodding to herself as if an unspoken question had been answered. 'And this is a battle orb? I have heard of them. They are fast. So you will take me to Earth quickly so that I can tell my father about—' her voice caught '—about Mzuri.'

Makettrig hesitated, looking towards Lilamani and raising his eyebrows. She spread her hands resignedly.

The other had noticed the silent exchange, for now, in spite of her underlying grief, her eyes flashed with a mixture of anger and petulance. 'You need not worry! My father will pay you well for your trouble!'

Seeing his sudden scowl, Lilamani said warningly, 'Makettrig! She's still badly shocked.'

'Very well,' he growled. 'I'll return you to your planet. But this is a warship, not a passenger vehicle—and I don't take payment.'

He subjected her to a somewhat hostile survey. Her black skin was smooth and flawless; her hair a mass of glossy black ringlets, piled high on her crown; her nose short and tilted, her lips thick, though quite well-formed. She had a determined—no, obstinate set to her chin. Spoiled, he guessed; too used to getting her own way. She was tall, like most of her race, with the usual massive limbs, and though her waist was well indented, her stomach flat, beside Lilamani she looked a hefty young woman.

She had been returning his inspection with equal frankness, but apparently with increasing approval, for now she suddenly smiled. 'Makettrig, that is your name?'

'Warden Makettrig.'

'Ah. So you are a soldier. And a proud one, I think. That I like. Thank you for rescuing me, Warden Makettrig.'

She had an odd, rather precise way of speaking, as if she were translating from another language, but with a pleasing, hoarse little catch in her voice from time to time. Quite suddenly, he found he was smiling into her eyes. And then as they continued to stare at each other, and without any premonitory warning whatsoever, he felt a *dragging* sensation at the very root of his being. The scene somersaulted and for an instant his own face swam into view. And in that instant he knew what was happening and in the appalling shock of that recognition his mind recoiled violently.

OUT.

He was looking down on her again, his brow beaded with the sweat of sudden panic. How could that possibly have happened? His glance was still locked with hers. This must stop. Instinctively, still in the grip of his panic, he projected his will and took control of her mind.

'Sleep,' he said hoarsely.

Her eyes closed. And after a long moment he forced himself to look up at Lilamani. Her eyes were very wide, and as she continued to stare at him her expression visibly hardened. He collected his shattered thoughts and desperately forced them to invent a way to turn hers aside.

'Thought she might make a good hypnotic subject,' he said at last.

'That was hypnosis, was it?'

'Yes. Better than *drugging* her.'

'Indeed?'

'This way, you see, we'll be able to get her story from her after the fling—without her having to relive an unpleasant memory, you understand.'

'How very considerate of you.'

Her hand touched a place on her arm as she continued to survey him, and now he could not disguise from himself that

his rather limping explanation had failed of its purpose entirely.

She let her glance wither him for some seconds longer, then abruptly turned her back on him.

Chapter Five

I—MAKETTRIG AND AFFINITY

Having flung the orb on its way again Makettrig had moved the girl to the bunk in his own cubicle and commanded her, still entranced, to tell her story. He stood, now, studying her frowningly, still deeply disturbed; nothing she had said had explained what had happened, and, furthermore, though theoretically a subject under mindcontrol could not lie, there had been a queer little twist to her tale. He pondered over her for some moments longer, but without being able to think of any further questions he could ask, then turned at last to the cubicle door, unconsciously bracing himself. For Lilamani was in the control chamber, waiting, and he had a feeling that his earlier crime was about to catch up with him.

She had usurped his position in front of the transparency. On hearing his steps on the ladder, however, she turned at once to watch him as he approached; and under that unwavering stare his temper, never exactly a heavy sleeper, woke to his defence bristling, and chased his guilt into the dark of his mind. He marched up to her and gave her look for look, defiantly. She continued to regard him, broodingly now, for a long moment. Then her lips twitched very faintly.

‘Well? What have you learnt?’

He felt vaguely deflated, perhaps also just the tiniest bit disappointed. Did this mean she had accepted his assertion of hypnosis? Not she—not with that look in her eyes. She probably thought the girl’s story of greater importance and she was right, of course. Dismissing his temper

to its kennel for the time being, he looked away frowning.

'Their presence on that asteroid seems to have been innocent enough,' he said with the faintest of stresses. He continued jerkily, 'Prospecting. More as amateurs than as professionals, though. Brother and sister. Her name's Mbala.' In spite of his underlying feeling of gravity and Lilamani's undoubtedly still ambivalent mood, he allowed himself a slight smile. 'Seem to remember you're interested in the meanings of names: his, Mzuri, means "the Good"; hers, Mbala, "the Wicked". From some local language. She and her people are bilingual, apparently—why she speaks as she does. She made a fuss when she was born. Mother's dead now, but her father's still alive. Called Kipkurgat. Rich. Influential. A merchant, dealing in metals. His craft they were using—Mzuri worked for him—and they seem to have been combining business with pleasure, she being along for the ride. They were surveying the surface of the asteroid, with Mzuri piloting, when apparently something went wrong with the drive and they plunged into that ravine.

'That, briefly, is her story.'

A crease had been growing on Lilamani's forehead. 'You don't sound entirely satisfied,' she said. 'Why did you say "seems to have been innocent"?''

'Well, in fact they'd started out for the Hecuban group of asteroids—which are rather more numerous than the Floran—and on a slightly divergent trajectory. Then, only a matter of days ago, they changed course and I couldn't get a proper reason for it out of her. She said her "intuition", but . . .' He let his voice trail. 'Of course people do sometimes act on the spur of the moment for no rational reason,' he continued. 'And there is ore on that asteroid. She could be a Sensitive. We have people on Titan who can dowse for minerals—though the talent's regarded more as a curiosity than functional in the light of modern techniques. She could unconsciously be one of those, I suppose. Though I've never heard of it being done from the depths of space—they must have been some

thousands of kilometres from the asteroid when they changed course.'

'Could she have been lying to you? Or holding something back?'

His frown deepened. 'N-no. Doubt it. Not under mind—' He broke off abruptly.

Instantly, her gaze sought and held his. The moment had come, he thought—not that her expression was exactly hostile as yet, but her eyes were slightly narrowed and they certainly held no warmth.

'Complete your sentence, Makettrig.'

Some instinct warned him that if he made any attempt to prevaricate now, it would be fatal for their future relationship and probably the mission as well. Furthermore, in his heart he felt that at this stage it would be slightly contemptible. He lifted his chin.

'I was about to say mindcontrol.'

'And that's what you used on her?'

'Yes.'

'And it isn't the same thing as hypnosis?'

'No. Mindcontrol is total. So far as we know, it cannot be resisted.' Then he frowned, remembering his experience with her. 'At least . . .' Once again he let his voice trail.

She waited, watching him shrewdly. Then as he remained silent, she pointed to a place on her arm. 'I remember a bruise appearing here for no reason at all, though you had a glib enough explanation. You did it to me, Makettrig?'

He kept his gaze on her. 'Yes. I did.'

'But you decided not to go through with it. Obviously. What made you change your mind, Makettrig?'

Still looking at her straightly, he said, 'Guilt. Shouldn't have done it. Been very strictly trained not to use my talent like that.'

She nodded slowly. 'I understand, I think. Yes, I understand. Any society would have to protect itself against people like you; have to ensure that you realized your moral

responsibility—it must be a great strain for someone with so impetuous a nature,’ she added a trifle bitingly. Then in a gentler tone, ‘Poor Makettrig! For one by nature so frank and open to carry as dire a secret! For you have to keep it a secret, don’t you? Because no ordinary group of people would tolerate a person like you living among them. My poor Makettrig. You’ve honoured me by trusting me, I think. And I’m glad, because I’d already begun to guess something of the sort and I’d have found it hard to forgive you, if you’d tried to lie. Yes, I’m glad . . . So I don’t expect another apology!’ She smiled at him, and it was like the sudden appearance of the sun from behind the limb of a planet, he thought. ‘Which should please you. Because you’ve already shown plainly enough how much you dislike to admit yourself in the wrong!’

He flashed her a grin, then as quickly became solemn again. ‘But this time I want to say sorry.’ He gave her his jerky bow. ‘Your pardon, Lilamani Lakshman Singh.’

‘Ah, Makettrig . . . I’d already forgiven you, but now you disarm me utterly . . .’ A stricken, almost forlorn look entered her eyes, then she visibly collected herself. ‘You disarm me, yet I must ask one more question. When you used your power on me, I’d provoked you. But why did you use it on her?’ She nodded up toward the cubicle. ‘It wasn’t for the reason you gave me. You looked—you looked almost frightened, Makettrig.’

His gaze became abstracted, for he had a feeling that this was more important than anything else that had happened so far. He wandered past her to stare out at the stars, as was his custom when he wanted to think. She turned to watch him; but in truth he was scarcely conscious of her any longer, his mind now wholly filled with the startling problem of his affinity with Mbala, a girl from Earth. For before he had retreated panic-stricken from the shocking unexpectedness of it, he had started to emp Mbala.

So little was known about emping, even though his was the third generation of its appearance among the few. That

it depended on there being an 'affinity' between the emper and his subject had been established with reasonable certainty. That that affinity was generated by an 'origin' which took the form of a profound, though not necessarily happy, experience shared mutually was supported by a growing body of evidence. Thus every emper, having lain in her womb, could emp his mother, and each one so far discovered had done so—indeed, the emp of the mother was in every known case the first intimation of the talent, the more generalized power of mindcontrol which had so far been found to complement it making its appearance after that initial experience. That an affinity should originate from an experience in the mutual past of both individuals was understandable. But this was not always so. Cases had arisen where it had been impossible to isolate an 'origin' preceding the act. On the contrary, as the lives of the individuals concerned had developed it had seemed impossible not to conclude that sometimes, if rarely, an origin could succeed the act; in other words, that an affinity could depend on an event which would occur in the *future*. There was indeed a school of reincarnationists among the priests of the Hierarchy which doubted that it would be the 'true' origin, which, they suggested, must still lie in the past, but in a previous incarnation. But whatever the school, it was generally agreed that an origin of some sort, 'true' or not, must occur at some time in the present lives of the emper and the emp.

Makettig, no theorist, saw his problem in its starkest simplicity. He had started an emp of this girl. Therefore there must be an affinity between them. Yet he had most certainly never met her before. Therefore, if the teaching was correct, the origin of that affinity must lie in their futures. Therefore, unless something vital were to happen within the next few days (in itself a daunting thought), he was fated to see something more of her whether he liked, or not. And that was a fact which in all fairness Lilamani ought to know, though because of its implications he doubted if she would like it.

He turned to face her again.

'There's another aspect to my talent,' he said. 'I'm what's called a mindcontrol emper. Which is to say that I can enter into the minds of a special sort of people and, as it were, live their thoughts and feelings. The limiting factor—what makes them special to me—is that I can only "emp" those with whom I have an affinity. An affinity has to have an "origin". An origin is some important experience which is mutually shared by the emper and the emp'd in their past. Or, failing that, some say, in the future.

'I've never met this girl before—at least in this life,' he added, remembering the more esoteric school. 'So . . .' He looked at her, leaving the sentence hanging for her to complete.

Her mouth fell slightly open and she returned his look from widened eyes. 'Are you trying to tell me,' she began in a voice which was little more than a whisper, 'that you and that girl are in some sense fated to share your futures?'

'That's roughly it.'

'But couldn't this—this "origin" consist of your rescue of her?'

'Might. But I doubt it. The emotive part of this incident hasn't been with her.' He gave her a crooked smile. 'Not with her, but with you.'

Obviously without thought, she exclaimed, 'Then I should have imagined you'd be more likely to have an affinity with me! Rather than—'

She broke off abruptly.

And he knew why she had broken off. Equally full of the same surmise, their glances met, and locked.

And now without any conscious will on his part, and in a manner which no emper had as yet been able to explain in terms satisfactory to any but his own sort, his mind began to feel towards her, secretly, silently, as it were putting forth tendrils, like rootlets growing unseen. And as he, so to speak, grew towards her, as his mind began to touch the secret places

of hers, he became aware of that so rarely experienced, yet unmistakable, sensation of *dragging* at the very ground of his being.

And in that very moment, though it had happened more slowly this time, he knew beyond doubt that he could, that indeed he was about to, emp her; that he had an affinity with her, as he had with the girl from Earth.

And in that moment she stepped back and flung up her arm, hiding her face from him.

'No, Makettrig! Not yet! Not yet!'

II—TO DISPOSE OF AN UNWANTED PASSENGER

The control chamber of a battle orb in coasting flight is quiet, the hush weakly diluted by an occasional muted gurgling from one or the other of the life support systems, by a muffled click now and then, by a barely audible sibilant whirring from the air recirculators. The silence which succeeded Lilamani's wild cry seemed all the deeper because of these tiny sounds. Makettrig stared at her aghast as she stood with her arm still shielding her eyes. He had emp'd his mother—that was how he had first discovered that he had the talent; he had begun to emp the girl, Mbala. But in neither case had they been aware of his secret invasion; he had never yet heard of a case of the victim being aware of the talent in operation. And why had she cried, 'Not yet'?

Now she turned her back on him and dropped her arm and, after a moment, let out a little sigh. She said in a voice which was once more calm, but strangely toneless:

'Did you come into my mind?'

So she didn't know for sure, Makettrig thought. Yet he must have somehow given himself away. After the smallest hesitation, he said briefly, 'No.'

His reply seemed to have relieved her in some sense, for though she still kept her back to him her tone became more lively.

'But you were about to.'

It had already become very plain to him that she would accept only honesty in their dealings with each other; that any attempt at duplicity on his part would instantly alienate her. And this was certainly not the time for it. He said forthrightly, 'Yes. I was.'

'Did you will it? Or was it spontaneous?'

'Spontaneous—that is to say,' he added carefully, 'that I didn't will it with my conscious mind . . . Lilamani, how did you know I was doing it?'

'I watched you when you were doing it to that girl. You had the same look in your eyes. Can you control this power of yours? Or is it always spontaneous?'

'I can control it — once I know the affinity exists.'

'I don't want you to read my thoughts, Makettrig. There are things you must not know. Not yet.'

Again, not yet, Makettrig thought. Aloud, he said mildly, 'It isn't a question of "reading" your thoughts. More like living them. I'd only have become aware of what was in your field of consciousness at the time. But I won't emp you again without your permission. I can say that now. So you can safely turn round—I've no wish,' he added caustically, 'to talk to the back of your neck for the rest of this mission.'

She turned round, giving him a rather sad little smile. 'You're a frightening person to travel with, Makettrig. I'm beginning to wonder if in fact you're quite human. Though of course—' Plainly recollecting herself, she broke off then continued quickly, 'though I suppose that could apply to me—since it seems now that we have an affinity, you and I.'

'We have.'

'For various reasons, which needn't concern you at present, I'm not entirely surprised. But that you should have an affinity with that girl worries me terribly. She can't go where we're

going. It would not be permitted. And yet, if there's an affinity between you, and its origin lies in the future . . .' She stared at him, frowning.

He said nothing.

His silent agreement seemed to rupture the surface of her self-control, for her eyes flashed and she came a step closer. She said tensely :

'Makettig, the future is not immutable. It consists of probabilities; it can be changed. The greater the probability, the greater the effort needed to change it; but it *can* be changed. We must rid ourselves of her.'

He said steadily, 'That's all very well. But how? We can't just push her out through the port. If we can't take her to Mercury, we'll have to take her to her own planet.' He shrugged. 'Means a slight diversion. That's all.'

'That I accept. But there's no need to land or tranship her. Put her in a space suit with a radio beacon and leave her in a parking orbit. We can signal her co-ordinates once we're on our way. She'll be safe enough.'

He stared at her. 'You can't mean that! Think of the loneliness. She's too young! She's probably never been in space by herself before—and even wardens need special training for that.' He thought of his own first solitary vigil in the Temple.

'She'll survive,' she said fiercely. 'This mission's too important for us to be squeamish.'

'Possibly,' he said drily. 'But I'm not exactly in a position to judge the truth of that.'

'You must believe me.'

He laughed shortly. 'I'll take your word for it and pray the One I'm never at your mercy! Lilamani, I won't do it. Not so much because I'm squeamish, but for the sake of my service. Wardens don't abandon helpless civilians in mid space—not even in parking orbit! And if that's not enough, think of the effect on inter-world opinion. She says her father's influential; she knows who I am; it would cause a diplomatic incident.'

She sighed. 'I wish you hadn't answered that distress signal. I warned you.'

'You warned me it might be a trap.'

She seemed about to say something more, then evidently changed her mind, for she sighed again and said resignedly, 'So what will you do?'

'Signal my superiors. They'll have to make the necessary arrangements with the Earth authorities. And give her father the news. Only humane. Perhaps they'll arrange for a ship to meet us. I'll do that now. And then I'd better wake the girl.'

He went to the control console, dictated a succinct report of the incident to the orb and ordered it to beam it to Titan with a request for instructions. Then he returned at last to his cubicle. He stood for a moment looking down at the black face framed by the pillow, hesitating, he did not know why.

'You will forget everything that has happened between us since I told you to sleep,' he commanded her abruptly. 'Wake now.'

Her eyes flicked open and for an instant looked directly into his. He suffered a very faint shock, for during a moment of time so tiny that it could probably have been measured in nano-seconds something in his mind reverberated to something in hers and simultaneously a faint crease appeared in her brow then was gone, and his feeling passed, and was forgotten. Her glance wandered, taking in her surroundings with a gathering frown.

'What has happened? Where am I now?'

'You're still in my orb,' he said soothingly. 'We put you to bed because you fainted.'

'Me? Faint? I do not faint!'

'This time you did. You'd had a very bad shock.' Partly to keep her thoughts away from the subject of her enforced 'faint', partly to guard against himself, or Lilamani, letting slip that they already knew her story, and, above all, because he had already embodied the name of her father in his signal,

he continued quickly, 'Please tell me who your father is and how you came to be on that asteroid so that we can tell him about you.'

Completely unaware that she had already done so, she recounted the events leading up to her misfortune.

He listened to her patiently until she had finished, then asked, 'How is your leg?'

She felt under the sheets, then looked up at him wonderingly. 'No pain! It feels good!'

'You must thank my companion for that,' he said gravely. 'She has healed it. But it might be wise for you to stay where you are for the time being. I'll bring you some food later.'

He returned to the control console and Lilamani. She raised her eyebrows.

'She's all right now,' he whispered. 'I had her repeat her story.'

She nodded her understanding and shortly the orb's sweet chimes called for his attention. A screen lit. Side by side, they read the message as it was flashed upon it.

FROM HIERARCHY FOR SEVEN DOUBLE SEVEN.
PROPOSE TO TAKE FULL PROPAGANDA ADVANTAGE OF YOUR RESCUE OPERATION. TEMPORARY INTERRUPTION OF YOUR MISSION MUST THEREFORE BE ACCEPTED. YOU ARE TO LAND THE WOMAN MBALA KIPKURGAT AT NANYUKI AEROSPACEPORT EARTH. ALL ARRANGEMENTS BEING MADE FOR YOUR RECEPTION.

Chapter Six

I—NEW EXPERIENCE FOR A TITANIAN

‘What’s the matter, Makettrig?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Yes there is—I’ve never seen you look so pale.’

Makettrig scowled, irritated with himself, but as much with Lilamani for not showing the signs of a similar weakness. For didn’t she, like himself, come from an airless world? Also she looked cool, while he found the heat here on the equator of this damp and dirty planet oppressive—but she was a Mercurian, of course. He wiped the back of his hand across his brow. ‘I’m hot.’

‘At this height? And out of the sun? Is that really all? My poor Makettrig, it’s lucky for you they didn’t make us land at sea level!’

‘Maybe,’ he said shortly. He let his glance travel round the room.

It was high, spacious, well-proportioned, a reception room in the ‘traditional’ manner, they had been told. The fluted columns separating four tall windows, the floor itself, some low circular tables and in groups about them several—to his eyes—massive-looking, thickly padded chairs, all were made of the same, brownish, prettily grained material, polished to a rich glowing patina. Having visited his uncle’s chambers at least he knew what that was: wood. He went to a table and fingered its surface curiously, sensing the difference between its warmth and the cold smoothness of plastic imitation. Then deliberately choosing a chair with its back to the windows, he

sat down, and in the gravity of this world felt the need of its padding.

'Be all right in a moment.'

She said nothing, but seated herself opposite him, a slight frown creasing her forehead. He looked away from her, turning his thoughts inwards, deliberately reliving those last few hours.

That long, slow fall through the marbled integument of this planet!

He had once hinted to Lilamani how vulnerable an orb would be in an atmosphere, but even he had not realized quite how much. The mass of this world imposed a Zone of Prohibition which extended up to thirty thousand kilometres from the surface and within that the air was deep. And the battle orbs had not been designed for aerodynamic flight, nor their plasma drives for more than an auxiliary function. Furthermore, though a plasma drive could operate within an atmosphere in pulsed jet mode, it did so with much reduced efficiency. These facts had been emphasized disturbingly by the craft which had escorted him down from the stratosphere: a slim, oval disk, which Mbala had said was called a 'mag-ship', since it rode the magnetic currents of this world—a form of locomotion impossible on Titan which had no magnetic field. It had circled about them gracefully, reducing the orb to the status of a clumsy bubble of metal as it sank through the thickening air, swaying to the increasing tug of the winds.

They had orbited in over a vast stretch of water, named Atlantic by Mbala, and Maketrig, to whom water meant ice, had marvelled to see so much in liquid form. He turned his gaze from its rippling reflections in Number Six screen to study her thoughtfully as she stood tense and excited in front of the transparency. During the few days of their journey to Earth she had made herself a pleasant companion—perhaps more so to him than to Lilamani, with whom her manner had tended to remain aloof—as much Lilamani's fault as hers, he suspected. And though at times a sadness had fallen upon

her when she remembered her brother, she had been gay and alert and always ready to show interest in the wonders of his orb—a sure way to his heart. Yet she was very young, only twenty—on Titan a mere child, if on Earth fully grown. His glance returned to the screens.

The orb was buried now in a stratum of murky, swirling vapour—droplets of molten ice in suspension, he assumed. Descending below that, a land surface of the planet began to unroll beneath, stretching to horizons so distant that for Makettrig, used as he was to the narrower reaches of the satellite worlds, they seemed to dwarf even the immensities of space. And the colour! Reds and greens and ochres and greens and more greens of every possible shade! Makettrig's sensitive eyes could well have been blinded, had he not already inserted tinted contact lenses. They came in sight of a great mountain made solitary by its height, with peaks jutting up like fangs and its shoulders thickly covered by some sort of growth, down one of which he noticed a ridge like a spine splitting apart the greenery. Mbala uttered a name with a catch in her voice. 'Mount Kenya!'

They had passed over groups of constructs of varying sizes; now Makettrig saw another such, nestling on the flank of the mountain.

'Nanyuki! My home town!' Mbala exclaimed. 'And see: there is my father's house! Mawingo. That means "cloud" in my language.'

Excitedly, she came to him in the control console and pointed on the screen to a largish edifice standing by itself some distance higher up the slope of the mountain. Makettrig's glance rested on it curiously. Buildings on the surface of a planet were not unknown to him, for the troglodyte cities had their eyries; but they were more in the nature of belvederes, mere lookouts. To him, the natural dwelling place of mankind was underground. Two or three kilometres from the town and below it, where a flank of the mountain began to slope up from a broad valley, a level expanse marked the

aerospaceport. Their escorting craft led them in to land near a cluster of buildings, from among which a small group of people moved towards them.

Mbala, now back in front of the transparency, began to wave, saying that they were her father and dignitaries of the town. Makettrig went to stand beside her and Lilamani—and blinked at the sudden blaze of light. For here it was high noon and even through his tinted lenses the swollen sun seemed to lance the jewelled air with a thousand piercing darts. He glanced at Lilamani, but, as he might have guessed, she was able to watch the scene without discomfort. He forced himself to continue looking.

Throughout his life, when surveying distant views he had been used to the savage contrasts of vacuum; but in the pervasive light of this gas-enshrouded world shape seemed to melt into shape and for some seconds his sight was confused. By the time he had sorted things out, the group was much nearer, a man among them waving back to Mbala.

'My father,' she repeated. 'Can we go out now, please?'

Unthinkingly, from sheer force of habit, he went to the equipment locker and began to pull out the space suits.

'But we will not need those things!' she exclaimed. 'Can you not see, Makettrig? There is air outside!'

He checked himself, laughing wryly, and ordered the orb to dilate its port. He waved the two women to precede him, remaining behind to give the orb certain instructions and slip a bracelet communicator onto his left wrist. Then he stepped to the port himself.

And then his private ordeal had begun. That sudden, awful feeling of nakedness!

Because Makettrig, having spent the greater part of his life in the airtight caves and caverns of the troglodyte cities, had never before set foot on a planet with a breathable atmosphere; never taken a step outside without being in a space suit, without on each occasion going through an elaborate procedure of check and counter check of air seals, valves,

locks. He had the same instinctive fear of exposing himself to the open unprotected as a man on a high gravity world would have of stepping off a cliff.

Somehow, he had managed to force himself to clamber down the orb's ladder; but he had not been able to take in much of his surroundings during the brief walk across the hideous expanse of the port, or during the journey to Kipkurgat's house, Mawingo, by ground car—with its open windows and a draught more violent than any he had ever known lashing his cheeks.

His thoughts returning to the present, he glanced again at Lilamani. She was still watching him concernedly. Without saying anything, he got up, walked to one of the windows and stared outwards with determination.

The window was open to the outside and a gentle draught—no, that was the word for a movement of air within an enclosed space; there was a whole vocabulary for such stirrings of unconfined air masses. Gale? Wind? Breeze—a gentle breeze fanned his forehead, cooling it and bringing with it a sharp, tangy smell. Cautiously, he drove his gaze outwards—to find a view worth his attention indeed.

The scene was dominated by the mighty shape of the mountain, its flanks soaring, smoothly swelling like a woman's breast to where from this angle a single peak thrust up like a nipple. A tall vegetation covered the slopes, displaying green on new shade of green until, higher up, where the mountain's vaguely female shape became more evident, it changed abruptly to a shorter form of growth, purplish in colour, amongst which naked rocks jutted forth. And here his gaze rested with a feeling of home-coming, even though the harsh outlines were softened by the intervening atmosphere and their shadows made strangely gentle. And higher still the snow-covered peak reminded him a little of the methane-crusted sentinels of Titan.

The window reached down to floor level. Pushing it fully open, he stepped through and gazed up at the peak for a time

and then, quite his own master at last, returned into the room to meet Lilamani's half-wondering glance.

'I'm all right now.'

Seeing the light of sudden understanding in her eyes, he reflected that this was the first time they had been alone together since leaving the asteroid—and he still knew very little about her. Had she perhaps visited Earth before? Was that why, unlike him, she had remained unaffected? Glancing at her forehead, he said :

'I see you've left that skull thing behind.'

Her forehead creased. After a moment she said, 'Can your orb be entered while we're away from it?'

He shook his head reassuringly. 'You needn't worry. The port's closed. It'll open to your voice and mine. No one else's.' He tapped the bracelet on his left wrist. 'This keeps me in touch. Seven-Double-Seven will sound the alarm if anyone tries to get in.'

Shortly after that Mbala re-entered the room with her father.

At the port, Makettrig had been too much occupied with his own particular trouble to do much more than present a polite appearance. Now he observed that Kipkurgat was a portly little man—little, that is, by Earth standards, for he was the same height as his daughter and a trifle taller than Makettrig himself. He had a round, jolly-looking face with a pudgy nose, the usual black skin and thick lips of his race and a thatch of short, woolly black hair. He wore an ankle-length, blue, toga-like robe, which swirled wildly as he bounced forward with both hands outstretched effusively.

'I am sorry I had to leave you alone. I had to speak with my daughter. But you will understand. Yes?'

His accent and manner of speaking were startlingly like Mbala's. Makettrig looked at her; her glance was downcast and her expression solemn and he realized that in spite of her pride and excitement to show them her planet, her homecoming could not have been entirely happy.

‘We understand.’

‘Now we wish to thank you for rescuing her. And for curing her leg.’ An incredulous note entered his voice. ‘She said it was broken. But she does not even limp! It is very wonderful! Our medics are most interested. They would like so much to talk with you.’

Maketttrig glanced aside at Lilamani. She was frowning slightly and he guessed that she was wishing that particular part of the incident forgotten. He looked back at Kipkurgat. ‘I’m sorry, but we won’t have time for that. I’ve my mission to complete.’

Mbala’s downcast gaze switched sharply to his face, then she looked at her father.

Kipkurgat said, ‘Surely you do not mean to leave us at once? My daughter would like so much to show her gratitude. So would I.’ His glance sought Maketttrig’s earnestly. ‘I have been told that your government has given permission for you to stay with us. Did you not know? Because no one of your people has ever visited this part of our planet before. My daughter will be most hurt if you do not. And so will I.’ He ended shrewdly, ‘I will not let our medics bother you, if that is what you want.’

Maketttrig knew very well that the Hierarchy would wish him to accept and himself was not averse; he really had little choice. So, though he was strongly aware of Lilamani standing stiffly beside him, he avoided looking at her, smiled at Kipkurgat and said vaguely, ‘In that case, we’d be glad to stay for a day or two.’

II—STRANGE LOCOMOTION

The beast’s pelt was brown, sleek and shining and its roughly cylindrical body stood on four legs. It had a long arched neck and a narrow head from which pointed ears

pricked up, each apparently capable of independent movement. It tossed its head and made a fierce snorting noise, yet its large brown eyes seemed gentle. A broad strap round its midriff held in place a precarious-looking pillion-type seat, from either side of which shackles were suspended, presumably to act as footrests. A small harness encircled the wretched creature's nose and jaw, holding in place between its teeth an iron bar, to which long tapes were attached, looping from it over its head to rest on its neck. The animal seemed to chew on the bar contentedly enough, though it looked most uncomfortable. Standing nearby with a similar animal, similarly accoutred, Mbala watched Makettrig's dubious expression, and giggled.

'That is a mare—a female horse. She is called Honey,' she informed him reassuringly. 'You know what that is? Yes?'

'No.'

'Have you no bees on Titan? How much I have to show you still! They make honey. It has a very sweet taste. That is why we call her Honey. She will give you no trouble. Have you *no* animals on Titan? How much you must miss!'

Makettrig glanced round at the encircling forest. Perhaps she was right, in a way, he thought. Parts of this planet, he knew, were as sterile as his own—or nearly so—but here there was so much life. A superabundance of it! He would never have guessed the impact of it from the formal tableaux in the Titanian museums. Glancing at Mbala, he thought that she herself seemed to have something of that abundance just now—vibrantly, her lips parted, her eyes sparkling. Today, she was dressed in a golden tunic over tight trousers of some dark, thick cloth. He was similarly dressed. She swept her glance over him.

'They are loose, but they suit you, Makettrig. They were Mzuri's.'

She gazed at him solemnly and he understood that he had been honoured. In those clothes, he thought suddenly, she looked slim—now that he had become used to the taller,

stockier shapes of her own race and now that Lilamani was not beside her to act as a contrast.

'Where's Lilamani today?' he asked.

Mbala shrugged. 'Vipingo to see the fishes in the reef. I asked her if she would like to come riding with us. But she was not enthusiastic.' She hesitated. 'I do not think she is enjoying her stay on Earth. But I think that perhaps you are, Makettrig. Yes?'

Recalling the crowded events of the past four days, the banquets, the dancing displays, the game reserves, the strange sights, the stranger freedom of wandering through the wide and beautiful countryside untrammelled by a space suit, the food so carefully chosen (once they had discovered his revulsion at the mere thought of eating flesh), he realized that he had indeed been enjoying himself. Lilamani's hidden anxiety, on the other hand, had not abated, even though there had been no sign of a reason for it—though on certain occasions some of the people had shown a certain aloofness, a curious hauteur. But perhaps that could be explained by the recent war.

Mbala broke into his thoughts. 'She is a mystery, that woman.'

Privately, Makettrig agreed with her, but kept his opinion to himself. He looked up at his animal. 'Is that where one sits?'

Her thoughts diverted, she began to giggle again.

'I will show you.'

Placing her foot into one of the dangling shackles, she sprang up onto the animal's back and then began to demonstrate how by pressing her heels against its flanks and pulling at the bar in its mouth it could be persuaded to go this way or that, to stop and to start. It looked simple enough. Makettrig, accustomed to a variety of devices which could whisk him through his environment at the touch of a button or a murmured command, heaved himself on to his beast's back with a feeling of patronage. That mood did not last long. The

animal made a sudden skittering, prancing movement to one side, catching him off balance, and he abruptly learned that a fall on this planet could be painful. Mbala was beside him in a flash, half concerned, half laughing.

'You must be considerate. Honey is proud—and alive like you!'

She stood by Honey's head while he mounted again, more carefully this time. They started off, she leading, and because his balance and co-ordination were good, he began to enjoy himself, looking about him with interest, his body swaying rhythmically to Honey's ambling progress.

They were proceeding slowly along a path carpeted with a form of short, green vegetation and walled by the tall columnar 'trees'. The sun was high and hot on his head, but a current of air was drifting down the mountainside carrying with it the sharp, tangy smell which Mbala had told him was the scent of the pines, which to a large extent composed the forest about them. Some thousands of metres above, the peak pierced the azure which canopied this astonishing world—that peak which, sunlit, it had been his delight to view through his bedroom window these last few mornings of this stay in Kipkurgat's house, Mawingo. The path seemed to lance directly up the mountainside towards it, though a ridge in the middle distance intervened.

'Is that where we're going?' he asked.

'The peak?' She laughed. '*You* might find it easy to breathe up there. But not me! Not the horses either. We go to that ridge. There is a view I want you to see.' She glanced sideways at him and, seeing how his pale cheeks were flushed, said, 'Exercise in the open air does you good, I think. You people should visit our warm planet more often. Do you not find it beautiful here? It must be so cold and dark where you live.'

'There's beauty on Titan too. I live under the Rings of Saturn.'

She was looking at him more directly now. 'It is a pity, Makettrig, that you have to wear those tinted lenses. They

make your eyes look even bigger than they are. They make you look strange.'

Catching her meaning and remembering Lilamani's comment, he frowned. 'I'm human.'

'Yes, you are human. That is what my father says. But he says that because we have lived so far apart for so long and because your race has changed itself, we have begun to forget that you are human. And perhaps you have forgotten that we of Earth are human too. He thinks that it is a good thing that you have visited us. Because our common people have been able to see a little of you. He says that it would be a good thing if you were able to stay with us for a long time.'

She looked at him hopefully, even pleadingly.

Makettig was inclined to agree with Kipkurgat; there was a need for further contact between the races and in that sense his rescue of her had been opportune, and the Hierarchy had been wise to take advantage of it. But he had a duty to Lilamani. And if there was a need for contact between Earth and Titan, what of Mercury, about which so little was known? Involuntarily, he sighed. In the stony way of his sort, he had come to like this girl.

'Why do you not answer me, Makettig? Is it that you would not like to stay longer?'

'It's not that. I have other duties.'

'I was afraid that that was what you would say. But when you have completed them, will you not, perhaps, be able to come back again?'

Come back again? he thought. Well, why not? The problem of the affinity between them, which had never been far from the surface of his thoughts these last few days, recurred to him yet again. Was that the answer to the puzzle— That he should return to Earth to visit her? Not once, but perhaps several times? Was it even too whimsical to dream that he might usher her through her life—for when she became old he would still be young. With that fancy still in his mind, he said in all sincerity, 'Yes. Perhaps I will be able to visit you again.'

That seemed to satisfy her, for her manner which had become intent and a little sad turned gay again. She pointed ahead to where the path began to run level and broad.

'See, here is a good place for you to learn how to trot—and to gallop!'

Following her horse's lead, Honey's gait changed, bouncing him somewhat, then changed again to a smoother, faster rhythm and the trees sped by and the wind of their movement blew his bell of red hair into flames above his ears, and he found that he was enjoying an impression of ecstatic speed such as not even the darting flight of his orb through the heavens could reproduce. Too soon, it seemed to him, the path narrowed, becoming steeper, and they were forced to a walk again.

They mounted the ridge to which Mbala had earlier pointed and shortly the path entered a level glade. Mbala led him to its outer edge and he found himself looking out over cascading forests, over a wide, long valley walled on the far side by a mountain range stretching into the furthest distance. And though his vision, accustomed to searching through the abyss, found even that crystal air a trifle murky, he had to admit that the view had a grandeur beyond any similar outlook on Titan. And in another direction, pleasingly framed by the branches of a solitary tree, he saw the toy-like roofs of Nanyuki, and, just beyond them, the aerospaceport. And there, like a black bead upon it, what could only be his orb, Seven-Double-Seven.

Or was it?

They had touched down next to a group of buildings. Where were they, then? The tree hid a part of the port. He guided Honey to a new position and saw them at once. And Seven-Double-Seven.

So a second orb had landed during the past few hours.

It could not be from the Saturnian System, or surely the Hierarchy would have informed him? Jovian, then—Nanyuki was not an important centre, but it was conceivable they had

been advised to follow his lead. But again, wouldn't he have been told? He pointed.

'Mbala. That other orb. Know anything about it?'

She stared outwards. Her shoulders drooped slightly and after a moment she said, 'I have heard it was in Nairobi. It came here during the night.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I thought you would know about it, Makettrig.' She gave him a quick glance then looked away. 'I was afraid it might spoil our ride.'

'What world's it from? Who's its pilot?'

'I do not know. Do you not know?'

'I do not.' He raised his bracelet communicator to his lips. 'Seven-Double-Seven. Report identity of neighbouring orb.'

Tiny, yet still soft and sweet, the orb's voice replied instantly from the device. 'Not known. No identification signal.'

'Report time of arrival.'

'Zero-one-zero-zero hours local time.'

Makettrig lowered his wrist, a furrow creasing his brows.

'Does it worry you, Makettrig?'

'Puzzles me a little, I must admit.'

'Do you wish to go back?'

Makettrig continued frowning to himself. A battle orb from his own system would automatically have exchanged identities, unless expressly ordered not to do so—and that was very unlikely—therefore it probably came from the Jovian System. And though they were allies, it was conceivable that it was on a mission that they wished to keep private for the time being. He shrugged to himself. Why should he bother? Evidently, it was none of his business. He turned in his saddle to give her a smile.

'Don't see why it should spoil our fun. Let's go on.'

Instantly, her whole attitude changed. 'I hoped you would say that!'

She led the way out of the glade. The path no longer climbed upwards, but curved round the flank of the mountain,

and they came at length to another forest clearing. And there he brought his horse sharply to a halt, staring incredulously at a group of seven or eight beasts roughly the same shape as the horses, but incredibly more massive in every respect and with a single long tentacle projecting from their heads.

Mbala gave a little exclamation of pleasure. 'I had been hoping we would see them! They are elephants—the biggest animals in all this continent of Africa!'

They watched for some minutes in silence while the beasts moved with ponderous majesty through the clearing. Then she led him on, taking a branch of the path which made down the mountain, until they came once again to a broad and level stretch. This time it was he who urged Honey to a gallop, without Mbala suggesting it. He drew ahead of her, surrendering himself to the exhilaration of the plunging, speeding motion. The path began to curve sharply.

'Careful, Makettrig!' she called, then her voice rose to a shriek. 'Slow down! *Slow down! Rocks!*'

But he was too much in thrall now to the sweet madness of that ecstatic flight to care and he let Honey race wildly on. Rounding the curve, the path began to sink steeply downward, becoming suddenly narrow and strewn with boulders. He came to his senses too late, pulling vainly at the bar in Honey's mouth. But she was totally out of his control. The end came quickly. Honey stumbled, recovered, stumbled again and Makettrig flew through the air.

III—LIKE A FINGER POINTING

Pain.

His flickering consciousness, struggling to locate the source of the pain, found light, heard sounds. Voices. A voice . . .

'I don't care what your medic says. I must see him. I have skills . . .'

The light resolved into . . . a sky? a roof? a ceiling? It hurt to see. A form was interposed. A face. Raven hair falling forward, eyes compassionate.

'My poor Makettrig. What have you done to yourself?' Hands softly touched him. 'Can you hear me, Makettrig? Look into my eyes.'

The eyes approached, swallowed his universe. Pain receded.

Suddenly, Makettrig was awake. He lay with his eyes still shut and remembered: the ride, the fall, the pain. But now there was no pain. Using the techniques in which he had been trained he searched through his body with his mind, looking for damage—and found none. Conscious, he could have mended himself; but he had been unconscious. So somebody else had cured him. A memory swam up of compassionate eyes.

Lilamani's.

He opened his own at last and looked about him and found himself back in his bedroom in Mawingo. He glanced through his window and saw how the trees of the forest stood tall in their own shadows, their leaves shining with a metallic glitter; while the peak above was a blinding white spire. Mid-day. But it was about mid-day when he had his accident.

Not even Lilamani could have cured him as quickly as that.

Therefore he had been unconcious for at least twenty-four hours.

A whole day wasted—if not more.

His gaze still on the peak, he saw how today a streamer of vapour stretched away from it, as if its tip were a stylus etching the winds. The peak was like a finger pointing at the sun. And at Mercury, so near the sun. And at Mercury, he repeated to himself. He had been forgetting his duty to Lilamani; he had dallied too long in this pleasant place; it was high time they moved on. And there was no reason to feel

sad, for he had already promised himself that he would return. But he had done his duty here, made a gesture of friendship which trained diplomatists could exploit. Like a shadow across his brooding thoughts, the memory of the second orb loomed. Wondering if it was still at the port, he felt on his left wrist for his bracelet communicator. His fingers met bare skin. His glance flew to his arm; it was totally bare. Could the bracelet have come off when he fell? No, the thing had a safety catch and was too robust to have been torn loose. It had been removed, then, while he had been ill. It would be somewhere about the room. He sat up and looked round him. Apart from his bed, the room contained a chair, a small table and a built-in cupboard with a highly polished sliding door in the wall to his left. Someone had placed a vase containing a graceful arrangement of heavy white blooms on the table and, seeing them, he became aware of a sweet fragrance; but otherwise the table was empty. He got up, searched the compartments of the cupboard, found his warden's uniform and the riding clothes he had been lent, but nothing else; searched the rest of the room, looking among the bedclothes and even under the bed, but still with no success. He was still searching when he heard the door open.

He swung round to find Mbala frowning at him anxiously. Her glance swept over him and, looking down at himself, he took in for the first time the fact he was now wearing a green sleeping shift.

'You should not be up, Makettrig. You have been concussed. Please get back into bed. Please. It is dangerous for you to be up. And you have a visitor.' A curious expression crossed her face.

'A visitor?'

Before she could elaborate, a third person entered the room, uninvited.

And Makettrig, seeing who it was, stared speechlessly.

Chapter Seven

I—NEED FOR COMMUNICATION

Maketrig continued to stare his astonishment; for here was the last person he had expected to see on this planet. And in view of her parting words to him, he was finding her presence not at all to his taste. His expression hardened.

‘What are you doing here, Lydia? he asked coldly.

Lydia stepped forward into the room, her glance sweeping up and down him. ‘The tale of your gallantry travelled fast,’ she said enigmatically. ‘They told me you’d had an accident, but I see you seem to have recovered.’

‘He has not,’ Mbala said indignantly. ‘He can not have! He was badly concussed. And bruised. Maketrig, go back to bed.’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if he has, you know. They have certain rather useful powers, do our wardens. I doubt if you’ll find a mark on him now—Maketrig, that sleeping robe becomes you. The green contrasts your hair and would, I suspect, exactly match your eyes, if they weren’t hidden by those lenses. Someone has taste.’ Her glance slid sideways. ‘Though I wonder if it’s known what sort of a . . .’ She paused deliberately, then continued, ‘man you are.’

Her own eyes also were blank, dark discs and made her expression extremely difficult to read, but it was certainly not friendly and her tone had slid into a sneer. She also, Maketrig thought grimly, had not forgotten her final taunt.

She was wearing the green tunic and trousers of the Reserve, he saw—with a feeling of only slight surprise, for

although she had failed the final spiritual test of her cadetship, she could still fling an orb and was therefore automatically a member of the force which the Outer Planets maintained to supplement the rather scanty warden squadrons in a crisis.

'You come in that other orb?' he asked abruptly.

'How else?'

'Training flight?'

'Not exactly.'

His brows drew together. The only valid—or legal—excuse which he could conceive for her to be wearing that uniform and travelling in an orb was that she was on some sort of training exercise—though, now he came to think of it, he had never yet heard of such an exercise taking place so far from home. And why hadn't her orb given its identity? He continued to stare at her. How pale and small she looked, he thought at a tangent—and yet on Titan she was above average height; he had become used to seeing darker skins, thicker limbs about him. His glance turned aside to Mbala. Almost as if she had deliberately intended the contrast, she had chosen to wear a flame coloured robe today, cut and draped to display her more generous curves, and, beside her, Lydia looked colourless, in spite of her golden hair. Lydia intercepted his glance, lifting an eyebrow sardonically, and he surveyed her with increasing disfavour; he had the distinct impression that she was playing some hidden game with him and did not really care if he guessed. Remembering then that a part of his duties was law enforcement, his expression became sharply stern.

'If it's not a training flight, why are you wearing that uniform?'

'Let's say it's partly a training flight.'

'And the other part?'

'Guess. You should be able to.'

'I can think of no other reason,' he said stiffly, 'for a member of Mimas's Tourist Service to be here in official capacity.'

'No? Then I'll tell you. I've come to take over from you.'

'Take over from me! In what sense?'

'Isn't it obvious? Hasn't your gallantry turned into a form of cultural exchange? I've come to carry on with the good work on a more permanent basis—it's not the sort of duty, after all, for which wardens are exactly trained. Is it? And so, dear warden and brother,' she sketched a travesty of his own jerky little bow, 'you are relieved, sir!'

Makettrig's ever ready temper, already smouldering nicely, began to flame; for her manner, half sarcastic, half mocking, could not have been better calculated to provoke it—as she knew very well, he thought bitterly, recalling certain incidents during their childhood together. And at that thought he became cautious, remembering also how it had been her habit to goad him when she wished to divert him from too close a look at her motives. Yet it seemed to him perfectly reasonable that the Hierarchy should wish to follow up their initiative with a more permanent representative—though it was a little strange that they should have chosen to succeed him a member of the Tourist Service—and a not very senior one at that. On the other hand, Nanyuki was no capital city, while in her job she must have learned well how to deal with other races. So what was she up to this time? For the time being keeping his temper in check, he said with restraint:

'If that's really why you're here, then you've come at the right moment. I had already decided to continue with my original mission.'

Mbala uttered a little cry of distress. 'No, Makettrig! You cannot leave now! Not so soon after your accident!'

But Makettrig could afford her no attention, for Lydia's whole attitude had changed abruptly, become visibly tense. Now, he guessed, he would hear the real reason for her presence.

'Your mission is ended,' she said harshly after a short silence. 'Your orders are to return to Titan.'

'Orders? Whose orders? And what of my passenger?'

'I'll deal with her.'

'You will, will you! And what has she to say about it?'

'She has offered no objection.'

That, after all the fuss which Lilamani had made about coming from Mercury in order to select himself in particular, Makettrig simply could not believe. It was a lie, and a clumsy one, made in ignorance of the person. Furthermore, Lydia had so far rather obviously neglected to name the origin of the 'orders'. His growing unease now transmuted into downright distrust, he reminded himself that there was one way he could very quickly check her authenticity. He turned to Mbala, whose glance was switching unhappily from one to the other and back again.

'Where's my bracelet, Mbala?'

Her gaze shifted to Lydia's face for an instant, then returned to his. 'Bracelet, Makettrig?'

'I was searching for it when you came in. Somebody must have taken it off my wrist while I was unconscious.'

'I do not remember you wearing a bracelet, Makettrig.'

He stared at her. He had used it in front of her during their ride together. She had heard him speak to Seven-Double-Seven, heard the orb's reply. She could not have failed to see it. Therefore she also was lying and must know he would know it.

She returned him look for look, then her gaze shifted fractionally in Lydia's direction.

So, he thought, she didn't want to speak about it in front of Lydia. In that sense her expression was easy to read; but there was something else in it as well. There was appeal, even yearning, in her eyes. Suddenly he knew without doubt that if ever there was a moment when he should help her, it was now; that, if asked, she would welcome him into her mind; that he would be doing her no wrong. Without further hesitation, he let his mind feel towards hers, grow into her as it had begun to do that other time.

The scene somersaulted.

And it was as if his naked spirit had plunged into a maelstrom of fire. Yet there was no enemy there—the opposite. But in that riot of twisting, leaping emotion his innocent spirit was lost and helpless, like a mote in a gale. The information which he sought was somewhere within the field of that turbulent consciousness; but the information presented overwhelmed and drowned it and he was utterly lost. If she had known, she would have welcomed his soul to co-suffer, that he knew again and now at first hand; but the onslaught of tumultuous, raw feeling was too much, too strange for him to endure unprepared. Cowering, his shivering spirit fled—not from hate, but from love.

II—NO LONGER YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

It had taken a very short time, yet long enough, he saw, for Mbala's eyes to begin to show concern. Forcing himself to pretend, he felt behind him for the edge of his bed and sat down with his chin in his hand, as if pondering the loss of his bracelet. He needed the respite.

Innocent he might be, yet he was not entirely so, for on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion Lilamani had thrust a certain knowledge upon him and he knew, at least in part, what the chaos of feeling had meant. If Lilamani should ever feel for him like that, she would not be defenceless, for she had the power to evoke a response whether he willed it, or no. But not Mbala. Nor any other woman—unless he were ready and so willed it. No Titanian woman would permit herself to feel like that about a man of his sort; it would take a very special kind of woman, he had already unhappily begun to realize, knowingly to love a man like him. Should he have told Mbala what he was? But when had he had the opportunity? And why should he have suspected . . . There was

the affinity, of course . . . Mutual hate could equally engender an origin, but this was love—he cut the thought away from him violently, deeply troubled.

At least he had learned, if he had ever doubted it, that Mbala was not and never could be his enemy. And at this juncture, he was beginning strongly to suspect, that might be vital information. He looked up into her eyes.

‘I expect it came off when I had my fall,’ he said gently, referring once again to the bracelet. ‘Let’s not worry about it now, though.’ He turned his attention to Lydia, saying coldly, ‘You claim my passenger has no objection to this change of plan . . . Speak to her yourself?’

‘No.’

‘Then I’d like to.’

Lydia’s eyes began to glitter. ‘Are you calling me a liar?’

‘Not necessarily. Who spoke to her?’

‘I don’t like your manner, Makettrig.’

‘Nor I yours. Where is she?’

‘At this moment, I’ve no idea. I’m not her keeper. But I’d advise you to obey your orders. She’s no longer your responsibility.’

She swung round before he could question her further and marched from the room.

He waited, listening, until the staccato sound of her footsteps had faded, then turned to Mbala.

‘Do *you* know where Lilamani is?’

‘No, Makettrig.’

‘When did you last see her?’

‘Not since just after your accident, when she came to visit you.’ She added in a troubled tone, ‘I do not think she is any longer in this house—Makettrig, if you are truly well now, was it she who made you well, like she did me? Or was that—that woman right when she said you cured yourself?’

He said absently, ‘I didn’t do it—though I could have. Mbala, tell me, what’s been happening while I’ve been ill.’

‘That woman came. She said she had a message for you

and that you would be returning to Titan. She said you were her brother. Is that not true?’

‘Not quite. Foster brother. Did she come alone?’

‘No. There were some men with her.’

‘Hm. Can you tell me now where my communicator—my bracelet—is?’

‘Yes,’ she said fiercely. ‘*She* took it. She came to see you while you were still unconscious. She does not know I saw. I watched her in that.’ She nodded in the direction of the cupboard’s polished door. ‘She had said she was your sister. So I did not like to interfere. So I said nothing.’

Maketrig frowned to himself. The loss of his bracelet was not a major disaster, the orb having an external microphone—assuming he could get to it—but that Lydia should have removed it secretly like that was exceedingly sinister—particularly taken together with her mode of arrival—and increased his already considerable anxiety for Lilamani. Her warning and her own sustained anxiety returned to him strongly.

‘These men. Where are they now? Do you know?’

‘I think they are with my father.’

‘Right.’ Moving quickly and decisively, he turned away from her to the cupboard, took out his uniform and pulled it on over his sleeping robe. ‘I must see for myself who they are. Take me to your father, Mbala. Now please.’

She began to protest, but seeing his expression, said resignedly, ‘Very well, Maketrig.’

III—THE RATTLE OF A TINY DRUM

The door to which Mbala led Maketrig was in the style which these people called ‘traditional’, that is to say it did not slide aside, or dilate, in the manner to which he was accustomed, but consisted of two leaves which swung inwards on hinges. The leaves did not fit together quite perfectly and

left a visible crack down the centre, through which the rumble of men's voices was just audible. Acting on a sudden intuition, he halted her, holding a finger to his lips, then put his ear to the crack.

A woman had begun to speak now, but too softly for him to make out her words. A man's voice interrupted her querulously, obviously talking directly towards the door, for a single word came to Makettrig's ear with sudden and startling clarity, then again the conversation became too indistinct for him to make sense of it. He pressed his ear more firmly to the crack, felt one of the leaves give and stepped back hastily. There was a sudden silence within the room and less than a second later both leaves were flung violently open.

'Why, just look who's here! I guess your friend just isn't feeling sick any longer, Lydia girl.'

Makettrig found himself looking up into the black, vaguely handsome features of a very tall man with a hooked nose and flashing eyes—features not easy to forget and he had heard that drawling voice before: on Mimas, with Lydia. Councillor Mboya.

'And just how long would you have been standing outside this door?'

Makettrig did not bother to reply but began to push his way past him into the room. Mboya clapped his hand onto Makettrig's shoulder and his fingers began to squeeze.

'Little man, I asked you a question.'

Mboya's hand almost entirely enfolded Makettrig's shoulder and beside his massive frame Makettrig's small figure looked frail indeed. But Makettrig had not boasted to Lilamani of his strength idly; the muscles which clad him with such seemingly dainty grace were compact and highly efficient. With finger and thumb, disdainfully, he plucked Mboya's hand off his shoulder and flung it aside. Mboya's eyes widened and he looked down at his hand unbelievably as Makettrig walked on past him into the room.

It was not a room into which Makettrig had so far been

invited during his stay, and was evidently Kipkurgat's office for the usual electronic gadgetry of verbal and visual communication bestrewed a massive desk in front of a window to his left. Kipkurgat's plump form filled an elaborate swivel chair behind the desk and three arm chairs were arranged in a semi-circle before it. Two of these were presently occupied, one facing, the other with its back to him.

For an instant nobody moved. Then through the ensuing hush a tiny, tinny rhythmical humming sounded clearly. He had heard that noise before. With the same feeling of fascinated revulsion which he had known on that previous occasion his gaze was drawn to the wizened figure sitting crouched in the chair facing him. It raised a trembling finger to beat a rapid tattoo on the locket-like device projecting from its chest, so that it gave forth a sound like a toy tin drum.

'Yes, young man, you remember this,' it cackled in a high, quavering voice. 'Eh, eh? My heart! Councillor Ngala's heart! And I remember you. You're the warden. Yes. You're like the rest of them. I knew you would be. I said so. Just like the rest of them. Nasty young men! I knew you'd try to be troublesome. Well, we're not going to let you. No, young man. You're on Earth now. Heh, heh! Just you remember that!'

Perhaps because he had not yet been treated to such an outburst, Kipkurgat stared and leaned forward.

'Councillor, this is the Warden Makettrig who saved my daughter's life. He is an honoured guest in my house. I do not see why you should accuse him of being troublesome.'

'Why's he here, then? Bursting in on us like that! Eh, eh? You ask him that! And he was listening at the keyhole. I could see he was! Yes.'

Kipkurgat turned to Makettrig. 'You seem to have recovered most quickly. For that I am glad,' he said courteously. 'But I cannot believe that it is good for you to be walking about yet. You should be in bed.' His glance went past him to where Mbala still stood in the doorway. He said rather

more sharply, 'What are you about, child? You should not—'

'Don't blame her,' Makettrig interrupted. 'I'm all right now and I asked her to bring me.'

'If you are truly recovered, then I am glad. But also I am sad.' His glance wandered to the other occupied chair, where Lydia's golden hair just showed above its back. "Because I am told that you will be leaving us as soon as you are well. And I had hoped that you would rest here as my guest for a few more days while you convalesce. Would that not be wise? Will you not stay with us for a little longer?"

'That's very kind of you,' Makettrig said smoothly. 'It depends on my passenger, though. Haven't seen her since my accident.' He looked round the room as if faintly surprised not to find her among them. 'Where is she?'

Kipkurgat's eyes widened. 'You do not know?' His glance switched sharply to Lydia's chair. 'You told me that you had explained,' he said accusingly.

Ngala leaned forward, his forefinger rattling a further miniature tattoo on his surrogate heart. 'I will explain.' He shot a malevolent glance at Makettrig. 'Nasty young men like him should do what they're told, without asking questions! But if it'll make you any happier, I'll make things plain to him. That I will. Heh, heh! Young man, you may not be aware of it, but you have been transporting an enemy of Earth. Your government does not wish that. It wishes friendly relations with Earth. So your duties with regard to that woman are finished. Finished. Do you understand? Finished! Now you must return to your own planet. To your own planet. We don't want you here. No! Not on Earth! And you may not speak to that woman. I forbid it!' Throughout this effusion, his high, quavering, old man's voice had tottered further up the scale. Now it ended in a screech. 'So go! And quickly!'

A tense silence followed and through it a faint moaning from among the trees outside competed with the humming of Ngala's prosthetic heart. Makettrig stared round him. Ngala, Mboya, Lydia, he thought; there had been a third man in

her party on Mimas—but perhaps he was not involved with this lot. Abruptly, he moved from behind Lydia's chair to confront her, eye to eye.

'Who's your co-pilot?' he asked harshly.

She was no actress and he knew her of old; to him, this time in spite of her tinted lenses, her features paraded her emotions: consternation, or something like it, then angry defiance, finally an icy calm, as though she knew she had committed herself beyond recall.

'I don't have a co-pilot,' she said blandly.

Though he had already begun to suspect it from the moment she had admitted the other orb as hers, he was nevertheless deeply shocked. Stealing his bracelet was one thing, but stealing a battle orb quite something else; for that was what her words implied and it was treachery. Very possibly, she had started out on a training flight legally enough; but it was inconceivable that she would have been permitted to pilot one of these precious machines beyond the confines of the home system without trained supervision—let alone to carry passengers! He could imagine the train of events: once on her own, she would have cut off all signals and after a reasonable length of time a disaster must have been assumed; any search operation must have been abandoned by now. How could she have come to do such a thing? He remembered the bitterness of her rejection of him that day on Mimas. Had her failure in the Temple so distorted her that she had rejected not only him but her entire race? There must be some other reason as well. She was his foster sister and remembering the happy times together he suffered a moment of pity and sorrow. Then his expression hardened implacably. For, if ever he had had the faintest inclination to take any part of her story on trust, this had proved it a total lie.

The silence continued as these two people, with their white skins now so alien on a planet which once their forbears had ruled, eyed each other in open enmity.

Mboya, who had been watching Makettrig's face said drawlingly, 'Why did you tell him that, Lydia girl? He didn't have to know that. Now I guess he won't believe any of us. And that might make him troublesome.'

She gave a weary little shrug. 'He was already beginning to suspect—even before Councillor Ngala's little speech,' she added sarcastically. Her mouth twisted. 'I know my Warden Makettrig! I never thought there was much point in this pretence once we had what we wanted.'

'I just happen to like people to be co-operative, Lydia girl.'

Makettrig looked at Kipkurgat. Was he being 'co-operative'? His brow was furrowed and his expression unhappy; yet his glance shifted away. Makettrig turned to Mbala, still standing in the doorway. She also was frowning, but with puzzlement and anxiety. The outline of a plan began to form in his mind and, abruptly, without saying anything, without bothering as much as to look at the others, he strode towards her.

Mboya stepped in his way, his arm moving swiftly. Makettrig halted, staring into the glinting lens of a hand gun.

'And where would you be going, little man?'

Makettrig looked up into Mboya's bold, glittering eyes consideringly, his plan still crystallizing. 'Back to my room,' he said coolly.

'Well, we'll have to think about that.'

Here, slightly to Makettrig's surprise, Kipkurgat intervened. 'Please permit him to return to his room. He is my guest. And whatever he says I do not think that it can be good for him to be walking about. He should rest. I ask you to remember that he rescued my daughter.'

Mboya hesitated, then said. 'I guess it won't harm us to let him stay in his room. Provided we take certain precautions. So we'll take you back to your room, little man, and you can go back to bed and make yourself comfortable. But we can't

have you leaving it, see? Not just yet. Not for quite a while, maybe.'

IV—BOOTS WITHOUT

The windows of his room were open, letting in the fresh, tangy scent of the pines which had so strangely enriched his life these last few days; letting in the sounds of the forest: a trumpeting from somewhere on the slopes of the mountain above: a sudden shrill chattering: a sighing of the wind in the trees. And then another sound, not of the forest, drearily iterated the reality of his present position: clump, clump, clump, as regular as a metronome, the thud of booted feet on the paved terrace outside. Shortly, their owner was silhouetted in his window, his jaunty, hip length red cloak swirling in the gaily pretentious uniform of Earth's armed forces. And as on each previous occasion, the soldier paused and turned his black face to look in.

Makettrig lay back on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, apparently listless and uncaring.

The man moved on, his measured tread fading, halting, returning. A second sentry was posted outside the bedroom door and Makettrig had been careful to check that both were relieved simultaneously, so far once every two hours. Though the loss of his communicator would now greatly complicate things, he did not fear for himself; for on this occasion, if ever, he thought he could properly use his peculiar talent, and feel no twinge of guilt. But he was deeply anxious for Lilamani. For although he still could not see how Mbala's accident could have been arranged as a trap, it certainly seemed to have turned out that way. Yet if it had been a trap, how had she been involved? Because after his emp of her he at least knew she meant him no harm—and the memory of that experience was still profoundly disturbing. Or had meeting

him changed her outlook?—after all, he had in fact learned nothing except the state of her emotions at the time. Lying tensely still, frowning at the ceiling, he wrestled with his tortured thoughts; for his presently rather vague plan depended on her and he did not like the prospect of what he might have to do.

A knocking on his door brought a certain relief, then Kipkurgat came in and he began to throw back his sheets, but the other put a hand on his shoulder.

‘No. You must rest. I insist.’

He lay back, not unwilling to appear convalescent still, in spite of his earlier denial.

Kipkurgat drew up the chair and sat down beside him, his plump round face, normally so benign and jolly, preternaturally solemn.

‘I am so sorry for this humiliation,’ he began, mouthing his syllables in the slow, careful way to which Makettrig had become used on Mbala’s lips. ‘I did not wish it. I did not wish that Councillor Mboya should march you to your room at gun point like that. But you will understand, please, that now—just now—I am not quite master in my own house.’ He paused, his brow deeply furrowed, as if not quite sure how to go on, then continued, ‘Your government, I think, is a form of autocracy. You do not elect your rulers.’

Makettrig frowned. In the view of a race as long-lived as his had become, government was a means to an end, that end being not society, but the souls which composed it, whose end, in their turn, was the One-Above-All. It was a saying of his people that sick societies consist of sickened souls and for a long time now their prophylactic had been to be ruled by those men whose very calling required the highest integrity, the harshest self-discipline, total self-denial: who were long and specially trained in the service of others. As a result, in spite of a hostile environment and human enemies, his was a stable and fundamentally healthy society. So now he said stiffly and with emphasis on the essential syllable:

'We select them.'

Kipkurgat held up his hand soothingly. 'Please. I mean no criticism. I only wished to explain how it is that you are now being treated as—' he hesitated. 'As an enemy. You must understand we have a federal system of government. Our world is divided into provinces. The members of our provincial legislatures are elected by a voting system. They in turn elect Councillors to represent them in the central government in Georgetown. Councillor Ngala, for instance, represents the province of Guyana and Councillor Mboya is also from his continent. This system produces rulers of widely differing characters and views. Factions come into being. So for a long time now there have been a War Party and a Peace Party. Briefly, the War Party believes that we black people of the Negro races should govern all the Solar System. You will have guessed that both Ngala and Mboya belong to the War Party.'

Here Kipkurgat hesitated once again. He gave Makettrig a vaguely apologetic glance.

'Until you came,' he continued, 'I also was of the War Party . . . The White-Yellow Wars are a part of your history, yes? When they were over, not all the white peoples were killed. A few survived and now their descendents live in the bad lands of the Northern hemisphere—some not so far from here, because we are on the Equator. Savages, Makettrig. For us, they are everything that is inferior. And because until recently there has been so little contact between the Inner and Outer Planets, we have come to think of everybody who has a white skin as savages, not fit to rule themselves. That is still the opinion of people like Councillors Ngala and Mboya. The Ganymedan war was a setback to them—temporarily, they think—so now they scheme in another direction. But I am no longer of their opinion. Because I have watched you these past few days and I know you are not a savage, Makettrig. Also you have been kind to my daughter.

'So, even though you are a prisoner in my house, please

think of me as your friend. I am not able to help you much, but what is in my power, that I will do.'

Evidently feeling easier in himself now, he looked at Makettrig hopefully. Makettrig returned his glance unsmilingly while he weighed an alternative plan in his mind. At length he said :

'You can tell me what's happened to Lilamani Lakshman Singh.'

Kipkurgat's expression took on a closed look and he shut his lips firmly. After a moment he said, 'That I am not able to tell you.'

So, in spite of his protestations, Makettrig thought, there were strict limits to Kipkurgat's 'friendship'. Perhaps he was too much a patriot, perhaps he genuinely believed that Lilamani was an enemy of Earth. Perhaps indeed she was. If she were, Makettrig did not care; Lydia had shown herself a traitress, nor did he like her friends, and he knew with certainty where his loyalty and duty lay. Again he gave the other a considering look, again contemplating a change of plan. But now Kipkurgat's manner itself underwent a subtle change. He cleared his throat.

'My daughter, Mbala, seems to have formed a strong admiration for you,' he said awkwardly. 'She has asked that while you are being . . . confined she shall have the honour of keeping you company and of looking after you. I have agreed, since that is the least recompense we can make. I hope you will not object?'

Wondering that this should be the cause of such obviously strong embarrassment, Makettrig hid his surprise and said, 'Of course not.'

Kipkurgat studied him silently for a second, then continued seeming to speak with even greater difficulty, 'I have heard it said that you people have very long lives. You look a young man. You look to me not much more than twenty-one. May I ask how old you really are?'

'As you measure time, forty-seven years.'

Kipkurgat sighed. 'Do you know that you are the same age as I am? You are old enough to be my daughter's father. I hope you will remember that and be gentle with her.'

The rigid morals of his people notwithstanding, Makettrig was not so naïve—nor so innocent any longer—as to fail to understand him this time. In one sense, he thought bleakly, he would be able to reassure this anxious parent, if in another he had his reservations. He said tonelessly, 'She'll come to no harm with me.'

Kipkurgat nodded to himself. 'I believe you. I think you are an honourable man.' He sighed again and looked at the other sadly. 'I wish this had not had to happen in my house. But that is how it is. But I think you are also a considerate man. So now I will tell Mbala to bring you food.'

He heaved his plump body out of the chair and left Makettrig a prey to thoughts no less troubled than those he had interrupted—thoughts strangely coloured by the ever-present scent of the pines. Presently, the door reopened and a heavier, sweeter scent overlaid it. It was a not unpleasing custom, he reflected, that these people had of anointing themselves with odorous chemicals—a sort of identification signal—and he knew it was Mbala even before he saw her come in with a tray. He sat up, Kipkurgat's final words echoing unhappily in his mind; for though the other might think him considerate, he knew he would be ruthless, if he must. She stood beside the bed without putting the tray down, holding herself stiffly.

'I am ashamed, Makettrig.'

'Don't be. This isn't your doing.'

She placed the tray on his lap and pointed to a golden ovoid amongst fruits of other shapes and colours. 'This is a mango. I think you will enjoy it. No other fruit has a taste quite like it.'

She sat down in the chair her father had vacated, watching him silently while he ate. The mango was delicious and he thanked her gravely.

'I am glad you liked it.' After a pause, she continued, 'My

father tells me that you will be going back to Titan alone.'

He studied her silently. She sat very erect, carrying her head proudly and wearing the gleaming black ringlets of her hair like a crown today. Her full lips were tightly compressed and her dark eyes, which normally had in them so merry a sparkle, were solemn.

'Me, I do not think you are that sort of man. I do not think you are the sort of man who can easily be turned aside from what you set out to do.' She looked away from him, then back again, with determination. She took a deep breath. 'My father tells me that you are forty-seven years old. I find it hard to believe, you look so young. And yet I can believe it. You have strength in you, Makettrig, more than a young man should.' She added, perhaps not so obscurely for him as it might once have been, 'I do not care. I want to help you. Because you rescued me. And because . . .' She let the word hang, then, giving her head a little toss, went on with a rush, 'Because, *mimi, na fikiri na tupenda. Ndio, na tupenda mingi sana.*' She gave him a half sad, half defiant little smile. 'That is in the old language of my people, which we still speak. I think perhaps you can guess what it means.'

Makettrig could guess what it meant. He felt the compassion in him flood his stony heart—and because of his inflexible purpose felt guilty too.

She said, 'Do not look at me like that, Makettrig. It will make me happy to help you. You do not believe I can, I think. So now I show you I can. See.'

She reached among the folds of her robe, pulled out an object and offered it to him.

His bracelet communicator.

He looked at her wordlessly, for the moment quite overwhelmed. Because he had almost given up hope of recovering it and this would certainly make things easier.

'I knew she had it, that woman,' Mbala continued. 'I went to her room when she was not there. It was easy to find. She had not tried to hide it—I think it was as well that

you said it came off when you fell. So now tell me how else can I help you?

In spite of his scruples, he did not even hesitate. 'Do you know where they've taken Lilamani?'

'I have tried to find out. But they do not trust me.'

He repeated the word he had overheard earlier. 'That mean anything to you?'

'Why yes! I was keeping it as a surprise for you. How did you know about it?'

'Heard one of them say it. While we were waiting outside your father's office. Could you take me there?'

'Yes,' she said doubtfully. 'I could. But what about the sentries?'

'Leave that to me. This is what I'd like you to do.'

He began to give her instructions.

Chapter Eight

I—LIGHT PRACTICE IN MINDCONTROL

Outside the window, a voice barked an order, feet stamped and marched. Makettrig's eyes flicked open. He touched a tiny button on his ring watch and the digits in its dial glowed: midnight. Good, the pattern was being maintained: a change of sentries once every two hours. Similar, if muted, noises came from beyond his bedroom door. A torch flickered. He closed his eyes and shortly sensed light through their lids as the beam rested on his face. He lay still, breathing softly and regularly. The light went out and he heard the new man outside begin to pace slowly away. Deliberately forcing himself to relax for the few extra minutes he had judged it wise to wait, he opened his eyes again for a last look through his window at the mountain.

Now, the snow-covered peak was a pale sentinel among the stars. But six hours ago it had shown another aspect, filling his room with rosy splendour, and his memory of that was still strong. Strictly speaking, he was not a stranger to sunsets; for each time the sun passed behind the limb of Saturn its rays were refracted by the outer few hundred kilometres of the planet's deep envelope, attenuating through yellow to red, to the faintest ruby spark: a dying glory of its kind for a distant, tiny sun. But just over six hours ago, in a slanting, crystalline light, he had seen the leaves of the forest glittering their brightest green as they fluttered in the caress of the evening breeze; while further up, the giant heaths of the moorland had distilled deeper purples and the

peak had been a steady flame against the darkening sky. He had heard from the forest depths a faint, far chattering and, nearer, white wings had flashed pink in the setting sun. He had watched the evening shadow creep up the mountain side, smelled the clean smell of the pines, heard the sounds of the forest become still and his own thoughts had stilled, too, with a sort of melancholy, for he had felt that he would never again see that particular beauty.

But now the peak was a pale sentinel among the stars—weak, quivering lamps that they were compared to the harsher fires of his knowing—and his heart was drawn outward, to his proper environment, fiercely. For the time to remain passive was past and the time of his humiliation was ending—perhaps violently. A creak sounded from the passage as the sentry there shifted his weight from one foot to another, then a cough; outside, the other sentry continued his slow perambulation. He glanced at his ring watch again; he had had to allow some minutes for the sentries to be changed, but if Mbala were delayed it might be fatal. The house was quiet. Then a new thought nagged—the guard commander's order! It had been in the local language.

The language which Makettrig spoke, having originated as an artificial tongue, was common to all the planets, but he had soon noticed how both Kipkurgat and Mbala and their friends in this province spoke it carefully and precisely, as if more used to their own. They were well educated, but what about these sentries? What if they could not understand him? Mbala could help, but it would mean a further complication. Fearing now that he might have less time to spare than he had allowed, he listened with concentration to the moronic metronomic pacing of the outdoor sentry as his footsteps approached. A pause. A flicker of light as a torch beam licked across the room to his bed, rested a moment, went out. The pacing began again. Makettrig counted. Ten paces. A pause—this man must be taller than the last; he had taken twelve. Ten paces again, the steps growing louder.

A pause. No torch this time. Ten paces the other way. Pause. Ten paces back again. Pause, and the torch beam reaching through the dark—dark, that is, for the sentry, but not so dark for Makettrig who at sunset had returned his tinted contact lenses to their carrying case. The light went out and the pacing began again. Makettrig slipped out of bed and moved silently to the window.

Like others in this house, the window reached from the ceiling to the floor, with hinged leaves opening inwards. It was not locked. Blessing Kipkurgat for having managed to arrange so mild a form of restriction, he opened it a trifle and waited for the sentry to reach the end of his beat. The footsteps halted. But this time the pause continued for much longer than usual. A murmur of voices came suddenly to his ears. Instantly tense, Makettrig poked his head round the edge of the window frame.

There were no clouds in the sky tonight and a small wind falling down the mountainside struck chill through his thin sleeping robe, carrying with it, as ever, the sweet message of the pines. The stars were bright—for this world—quite bright enough for Makettrig's huge eyes which functioned best in a lighting not so very much brighter, and he saw about three metres to his right two figures huddled against the edge of the building. The short uniform cloak distinguished the soldier, but the other was skirted. Their voices came to him more clearly now: a man's deep rumble, answered by a sudden shrill giggle. The man raised a steaming cup to his lips. Cursing human frailty, Makettrig withdrew his head and looked at his watch yet again. He had to deal with this man first because of his torch, and provided Mbala kept to his timing exactly, he still had a minute or two to spare. Otherwise he might have to revise his plan drastically. He waited with his eyes intent on his watch, while a further flurry of murmured conversation came to his ears. Some seconds later, however, the sentry's measured pacing re-started. Makettrig returned quickly to his bed and lay still. The steps halted, the torch

beam flickered, winked out and the pacing sounded again. Makettrig returned to his position by the window, poked his head through once more and was in time to see the woman disappearing round the corner of the building; in the other direction, the sentry was nearing the end of his beat. Makettrig opened both leaves of the window fully and stood back from the threshold, counting the man's steps . . . At the end of his beat . . . Returning . . . *Now*. Makettrig stepped through to confront him face to face. The sentry halted with a gasp, his mouth gaping, then the muzzle of his gun jerked up.

'What you do here, man?' he demanded in a deep, heavily-accented voice. 'You go back. Now.'

Saying nothing, Makettrig locked his gaze on the other's and reached forth with his will. The man jerked visibly, then became still.

'You do not see me here,' Makettrig commanded. 'Neither now, nor later, nor anyone with me then.'

'I—do—not—see—you.'

'I am in bed.'

'You—are—in—bed.'

'You will see me in bed when you shine your torch in my room.'

'See—you—in—bed.'

'You will not remember that I have spoken to you. Go on with your patrolling.'

Makettrig stepped aside and, as if for him he no longer existed, the man continued his slow, methodical pacing.

Not entirely trusting his own talent, never having tested it to quite this extent before, Makettrig watched as the man came to the end of his beat, halted, turned about, paced back to the window, where, still completely ignoring Makettrig, he paused, shone his torch through to the bed, seemed satisfied and went on. Makettrig returned into the room and without bothering any longer to be silent in his movements flung open the door and went through. This sentry was leaning against the opposite wall of the passage, staring blankly.

He stood up, his eyes instantly alert and suspicious.

'Water,' Makettrig said. 'I'm thirsty. I need water.'

'Nani?'

Makettrig pointed to his mouth. 'Water.'

'Wa— ter? Ah. *Maji*.' The man pushed Makettrig back into his room and pointed to a carafe on the table. '*Uko maji*.'

It was clear that this sentry would never understand his instructions; Mbala would have to supply the necessary phrases—in this case involving only a minor delay, he hoped. Without further ado, he reached forth with his will. The man jerked and became still. Makettrig took him by the hand, led him back to the passage and propped him against the wall in the same attitude as he had found him. He returned to his room, took the opportunity now to pull on his uniform, then stood, peering through the partly open door, so that the sentry was just within his view. The man remained rigid and unmoving, the slow rise and fall of his chest the only sign that consciousness of a sort remained in him, though from a distance he looked natural enough. Makettrig edged forward a little, his gaze fixed down the length of the corridor. Presently, a clicking came to his ears, grew louder, then a figure appeared round the far corner. Mbala. He relaxed slightly, noting that she was wearing the sort of clothes he had asked her to: dark blouse, dark trousers. As she came in full view of the sentry, her steps faltered, her expression clearly showing her dismay. Grimly, because he had deliberately been vague as to how he would deal with the sentries, thinking that she would neither understand nor believe—thinking, too, that if she did it might antagonize her—Makettrig went to meet her and drew her back with him towards his room. She came forward hesitantly, her glance darting from him to the sentry fearfully, then with growing puzzlement, which, as she came near enough to see the man's blankly staring eyes and unmoving posture, changed to something like horror.

'Is he dead? Have you killed him?' she whispered.

Makettig shook his head. 'Hypnotised,' he said briefly, hoping that with her, unlike Lilamani, that would be enough. 'But I can't make him understand me.'

Rapidly and urgently, he explained the phrases he needed, repeating them after her as she gave them to him, then to the sentry. The man relaxed, shifted his stance a little and the glazed look left his eyes. Mbala watched with awe as the man raised a hand languidly to pick his nose, staring through them the while as if they did not exist.

'Makettig, I begin to think you are not human.'

He said savagely, 'I'm human. Whatever I am, we've no time to waste.'

He led her through the room and out through its window. Seeing the other sentry pacing towards them, Mbala clutched at Makettig's arm.

'Don't worry. He's had the same treatment. Come on.'

He hurried her away from the house, while the human automaton behind them continued his slow pacing through the night.

II—THE GREAT TREE

It was very dark, even Makettig found it so, for the branches of the tall trees on either side interlaced thickly overhead and no faintest star gleam shone through. It was very still. Mbala leading, they followed the windings of the path as it tunnelled through the living darkness, their feet whispering with the thick loam of the forest floor. They came at last to a final turn. A faint patch of light began to show ahead and Makettig took the lead, almost immediately halting as the forest ended abruptly.

He was looking out on a circular glade, like a silvery pool among the dark, still trees, for a sickle moon had risen during their walk. The glade must have been at least fifty metres

in diameter and was covered with a short turf, criss-crossed by many narrow tracks, and was so regular in shape that he guessed that it must have been artificially cleared at some time in the past. To his right, a small tarn, like a leaden shield in that light, was rimmed by bare earth, obviously much trodden. And in the geometrical centre of the glade stood a solitary tree. It was quite the biggest which Makettrig had so far seen and its huge trunk sprang upwards cleanly for at least ten metres before the first of its vast branches spread out to darken the ground beneath it. Mbala put her mouth to his ear.

'This is Treetop,' she whispered. 'The animals come here for the water and for the salt which is put down for them. See over there.'

She pointed to a heap of material, which he had thought to be a rock. He continued his scrutiny of the great tree, observing how in its middle height its outline was somewhat bulbous. *Treetop*: the word he had overheard, eavesdropping outside Kipkurgat's office. Earlier in his room that afternoon, she had explained that traditionally there had always been a tree in the centre of this glade; that tree had followed tree, in turn to be used as an animal observatory; that this particular tree was itself very old and that over the decades its branches had been trimmed and trained to grow round a central cavity, in which a small 'house' had been constructed. Now she pointed to a seemingly natural gap among the leaves directly opposite them.

'There is an observation window through that. There are more all round the tree.'

No light showed.

Seeing the tree now, he thought it a strange place to choose for a prison. Yet it was a secret-looking place, buried here in the depths of the forest—in that sense a sinister-looking place where things could be done which elsewhere might attract unwelcome attention. The thought had come to him with a sudden chill pang and he even began to hope

that Lilamani was not here after all—it did look deserted and his hunch had depended on no more than a word overheard. But if she weren't here, he'd have no choice but to return to Mawingo and mindcontrol its inhabitants by stealth and singly until he found one who knew where she was—including Kipkurgat himself, if necessary, and how would Mbala react to that? But to keep that option open he'd have to complete his search here and return before his escape was discovered. For though those sentries would forever assert he had been in his room during the entire time of their duty and was still there, their reliefs would see the truth. And though the existence of mindcontrol could at the most be no more than a wild rumour on Earth, Ngala's hatred of wardens was peculiar. He'd have liked to know the story* behind that, for he had a feeling Ngala might have met another like himself. He looked at his watch. The walk here had taken forty minutes. He could allow forty minutes for his search then, or a few more if they ran.

In the lead still and keeping well within the shadow of the forest, he began to circle the glade. Coming level with the pool, his foot brushed against something soft. He halted, looking downwards, and saw that he was standing among a pile of huge droppings. Mbala bent down and touched one of them.

'Elephant,' she whispered. 'Still warm. They must be near.'

She straightened, listening tensely, peering into the shadowed depths.

The small wind of the earlier night had died and the leaves of the branches above them hung motionless. Distantly, a stream sang a tinkling song. Then suddenly from somewhere in the forest nearby a crashing and cracking of wood shattered the hush. They stood unmoving while the noise retreated, grew fainter and the quiet returned. In the centre of the glade the great tree still stood dark and silent. He led on.

* Note: those who like Makettrig and would also like to know the story should consult *Our Man For Ganymede* by the same author.

They continued to circle the glade, halting every now and then when they came opposite a gap among the leaves framing an observation window. There was still no sign of life. And then, almost without warning, having reached a point nearly opposite their starting place, they came upon light. An abrupt, harsh, steady light, shining from out of the centre of the tree like a heavily lidded cyclopean eye; a white, intense light reflected from an invisible source against the walls of a room beyond. It was too bright a light to find in such a place, Makettrig thought, too intense for mere illumination; burning out from the centre of that ancient tree at that time of night, there was something wrong about it. The light dimmed as a shadow showed for a second, then passed. Walking more quickly, they continued round the glade and came back to their starting point without seeing any further sign of occupation.

The crescent moon was well up now and the great tree stood in its own shade, surrounded by a ring of light. The glade's turf was short and they had been unable to find any covered approach; even crawling, a person emerging from the forest would be seen. But the only sign of life had been on the far side of the tree. He put his lips to her ear.

'Wait here.'

'No. There is a janitor. If he sees you coming alone he will be suspicious. He knows me. Sometimes I bring friends here after a party. He is used to that. Let me come with you.'

Makettrig hesitated only briefly: to use his talent he had in the first instance to be within sight of his victim's eyes; she could be his decoy.

'Very well.'

'We will walk like this.' He felt her hand slip into his. 'Like—' He heard her breath catch. 'Like lovers, Makettrig. You do not mind?'

Feeling of a sudden unhappy and guilty, his whisper in reply was almost fierce. 'Of course I don't mind.'

Her hand squeezed his and they strolled into the moonlight, casually, their shoulders touching. They reached the tree without being challenged and entered the shade beneath it.

The darkness here was not so deep as in the forest, for the lowest branches were well above their heads and the radiance in the glade lapped under to reach the bottom steps of a balustraded stairway. It spiralled round the great trunk until it was lost among the high shadows, and, above and beyond, a faint gleam showed through the branches, where, he guessed, the light from the window they had seen was being reflected by the leaves surrounding it. They halted, listening. It seemed even quieter here than it had in the forest; not a leaf rustled, not a branch creaked and even the song of the distant stream had faded. He mounted the stairway and began to climb softly and lightly; then she added her greater weight and he felt the construction quiver. From somewhere above a joint cracked loudly. Almost immediately, hinges screeched and light abruptly sliced through the darkness, outlining a narrow door and a small platform in front of it, about two metres above his head. The stairs shuddered again as a figure stepped through onto the platform.

'Who comes?' a hoarse voice called.

Maketttrig froze.

The man came to the edge of the platform and peered downwards.

'Who is that?' And then more sharply and with a hint of alarm, 'I can see you. Who is that? Why do you not answer?'

Maketttrig felt Mbala's lips brush his ear. 'It is the janitor. I will speak to him. He knows me.'

She pushed past him and climbed up to the platform.

'Farah,' he heard her say softly. 'It is I, Mbala, daughter of Kipkurgat. I have come from a party with a friend to show him the animals.'

'The house is full. You cannot come in.'

'But we do not wish to stay long. Can we not watch from the Room of the Pool? That cannot be full.'

The man's voice became sharp again, 'You cannot come in.'

'But——' she began, then broke off abruptly, and in the ensuing silence the whole forest seemed to be listening.

Then the noise came again: not very loud; a drawn-out bubbling, gargling sound. It could have come from a throat, though, if so, Makettrig found it difficult to picture it as human. But it had come, there was no doubt about it this time, from somewhere beyond the open door. The janitor gave a startled grunt and began to turn away.

Makettrig leaped the remaining steps to the platform, pushed Mbala aside, took the man by his shoulders and locked his gaze on his eyes.

The man jerked and became as still as the sentries before him.

III—AMONG THE GREEN

Makettrig stepped swiftly to the door, shut it, then turned back to the janitor.

Treetop, he had earlier learned from Mbala, was a plastic construction on two levels, the lower containing the janitor's quarters. This, the now entranced man replied to his urgently whispered question, was empty except for himself. But Makettrig had already seen the shadow of someone else awake in the building who might also have heard the sound of their arrival. And there had been that strange noise.

'Go inside,' he ordered. 'Wait. If anyone comes from above who has heard us, tell him you think it was an animal bumping against the stairs. Go now.'

With instant obedience, the janitor swung round and the door emitted a brief blink of light as he went in. Mbala stirred

restlessly in the darkness at Makettrig's side, then her voice came to him in an almost inaudible mutter.

'You look at a man. You say do this, do that, and he does so. That is magic. You make me afraid. But I do not care. I will still help you—Makettrig, what was that noise we heard?'

He whispered briefly, 'I don't know,' then fell silent, feeling a sudden bitter little shaft of loneliness and wishing that it had not been necessary for her to see his talent at work. For, though he had foreseen it and no longer had a right to such regrets, he guessed that whatever she might say she would never quite be able to trust him again.

Several seconds going by without any sound coming from beyond it, he eased the door open a trifle and put his ear to the crack. All was quiet. He opened it fully and stepped softly inside, Mbala following. They found the janitor standing unmovingly in the centre of a small, semi-circular hall giving access to a number of narrow doors, his eyes symptomatically blank and staring.

'Anyone come down?' Makettrig asked.

'No one has come down.'

'Take us to your own room.'

The janitor led them into a narrow room sparsely furnished with a bunk, a table, a chair. Makettrig glanced quickly round it then returned to the hall by himself and opened doors one by one. He discovered a small office, a kitchen, a store room and a shower cubicle, all empty. From the hall, stairs spiralled up to a further door. It was shut. He returned to the janitor's room.

'How many people are there upstairs?'

'I do not know.'

'But you said the place was full. Didn't you see them come in?'

'I did not see them.'

'Then how do you know the place is full?'

'A man came to me. He booked the rooms. While he was

with me, people came. He said I need not know who they are. He said I was not to go upstairs. He said I was not to let anyone else in. Because all the rooms are booked.'

'Did all the people stay upstairs?'

'I do not think so. I heard some go out again while the man was with me.'

'Did he go upstairs?'

'I did not hear him. I do not know. I stayed in my room as he told me. He gave me money.'

Mbala made an impatient sound. 'Just another party! Sometimes people have parties here about which they do not wish others to know. So they bribe this man to stay out of sight. "See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil." Now do you understand?'

But Makettrig, coming from an entirely different culture, did not understand. He gave her a frowning glance. 'I'll have a look, just the same.' He turned back to the janitor and, uncomfortably aware that Mbala was watching him closely, ordered him, curtly and succinctly, to forget their visit entirely, to be unaware of their presence from then on, to sleep and remain asleep until morning. Promptly the man sat down on his bunk. His glance wandered vaguely round the room, seeming to pass right through them in the process, until it rested on a clock on the wall. A brief, puzzled frown ruffled his features, as if he were surprised at finding himself awake at that hour, then he yawned, lay back, stretched himself and closed his eyes. He began to snore.

'I'm going upstairs,' Makettrig said to Mbala softly. 'Wait here.'

'No,' she whispered fiercely. 'I will not!'

'Yes. No need for you to be seen with me. Save you from trouble later.'

'If I am seen, then you will make them forget. Like this man here. This is my adventure. I want to be with you until the end.'

She stared at him half pleadingly, half defiantly. Then

seeing a sudden fleeting change in his expression, her glance fled away from his. She covered her eyes.

'Do not magic me. Please do not. Do not make me forget you, Makettrig.'

For a second he hesitated, not quite sure in himself which would be the wisest, or kindest, thing to do. Then he sighed.

'I won't "magic" you.'

He led the way back into the tiny hall and up the spiral stairway, no longer trying to stop her from following. At the top, he put his ear against the door. He could hear no sound from beyond it. This door, he saw, was of the kind which slid open on runners; slowly, gently, he began to ease it aside, until a crack just showed. Again, he listened. He could hear no sound of movement, no voices; he received only that impression of echoing silence which an empty room conveys. Hesitating no longer, he slid the door fully open and stepped through.

The place was in darkness. He fumbled round the edges of the door for a light control, but Mbala's hand, moving with greater sureness, found it first and a panel began to glow softly over their heads. They were in a long, oval room with a low ceiling, evidently a lounge of sorts, for chairs were grouped at either end before windows which slanted outward to give a downward looking view. Including the stairway, there were six doors, three in each of the long, curving walls. They were all shut. It was very quiet. Unnaturally quiet, Makettrig thought, for surely a light plastic construction such as this would act as a sounding board for any movement of the branches amongst which it nested.

And then, almost imperceptibly at first, a murmuring stole through the silence, then broke off. A gasping, garbled sound replaced it. The murmuring began again, ceased. Makettrig's questing glance fixed on the centre door of the opposite wall. Abruptly, like a whiplash laid across the hush, a guttural voice snarled a single word.

'Answer!'

There was a short silence and then again that snarling command.

'Answer! You can speak now. I know it. Answer!'

Again, there was silence. And then, softly at first, a low, bubbling moaning began. It continued like that for a second or so, then rose sharply in pitch, climbing to a high, sustained shriek. But long before the lungs which expelled that dreadful cry could exhaust themselves, Makettrig was moving. He hurled himself across the room and swung his right leg in a flying kick. His heel landed against the door with the full weight of his body behind it. The door burst inwards with a noise like a small explosion, splintering and scattering plastic shards. He flung himself through into a smaller room, his eyes slitted against a sudden intolerable glare; for this was the light which they had seen from outside, a light almost too bright for his sensitive eyes even though its source was turned away from him. That source, he now saw, was a lamp with a silvered parabolic reflector on a stand directed to shine down on a table in the centre of the room. And on the table a supine figure lay strapped to its surface by thongs which passed round its chest, thighs and ankles—thongs which nevertheless failed to control wholly its writhing and twisting. A sort of basketwork of wires and metal bands covered its head and face, so that from where he stood no feature was visible. A thick cable connected this device to a box like a suitcase, its upper lid hinged open to expose a number of dials. A greenly glowing oscilloscope displayed a snake-like wave-form, the undulations of which seemed to parallel the motions of the suffering figure on the table. A man stood in front of the box, his hand on a vernier control, his face still turned in shocked startlement towards the shattered door.

Makettrig registered the scene in one flashing, narrow-eyed glance then leaped the remaining distance between himself and the man and smashed his fist into his jaw. The man tottered back a few steps, tripped and fell. Simultaneously,

Makettig tore the cable from its connections. The figure on the table relaxed at once, and was still. Makettig's glance returned to the man briefly, saw he lay unmoving, then fell on the box. The abrupt and violent removal of its load had evidently imbalanced its circuits, for all the needles of its pointer displays were twitching wildly and only the oscilloscope was quiescent, like a huge green eye balefully glaring from among the threshing currents.

Throughout the Outer Planets it was known that on Earth a form of electronic devilry, now illegal, called the 'Psychoprobe' had occasionally been used for the interrogation of prisoners during the recent war. It had been conceived by neurology out of a form of behavioural psychology which had recrudesced for a time on the planet. Its uses as a research tool had proved limited, but as an instrument of torture it had been found extremely effective and this, Makettig felt certain, was a portable variant of the device—and probably explained why its present victim had been brought to this lonely spot. With an access of violent revulsion he picked it up and hurled it towards the window. It smashed through, shattering casement and glass and leaving a jagged hole behind it. A tinkling crash sounded from outside and the broken window was outlined by a flare of light which briefly outshone the glare of the parabolic lamp still shining on the figure on the table. The figure lay limply and for a heartbeat there was no movement, no sound, within that room. But now the operator of the machine had begun to stir. With a feeling of loathing such as no person or event, real or imagined, had ever induced in him before, Makettig watched him with grim anticipation, intending no mercy.

In appearance, he was somewhat unusual. He had the squat nose and thick lips which Makettig had become used to seeing among the Negroid peoples of Earth; but his skin was a shining, jet black and his cranium was huge, totally bald, having a high, domed forehead which seemed to loom over and reduce the other features, even the body, so that in

totality he had the look of a dwarf, though in fact he topped Makettrig by a centimetre or so. And yet the weirdly aberrant outline of that monstrous head was vaguely familiar to Makettrig as, rubbing his jaw, the man stood up to face him. Their glances met. And now, in spite of his loathing, Makettrig suffered a moment of intense surprise, for into the man's eyes came a look of extreme astonishment, then growing horror, which nothing in his own appearance, Makettrig felt sure, could explain. The look passed almost as quickly as it had come and simultaneously Makettrig's memory leaped the gulfs of space and time to an earlier meeting on Mimas.

'Yes,' the man said in a guttural, snarling voice, 'you know me. I am Shams.'

Now, his eyes were slitted and his lips drawn back from his teeth in a grimace of fury which had nothing of fear in it. And Makettrig's own expression was equally unpleasant as with an intent to malevolence which until now he would never have guessed in himself, he locked his gaze on the other's and let his will leap forth. Sham's eyes flew open, his whole body jerked and for a moment went rigid. Triumphantly, Makettrig unleashed his searing hatred. Shams groaned. And then with an abruptness which was all the more appalling because on no previous occasion had he encountered anything like it, Makettrig had the sensation that he had slammed into a wall of blackest night. His sight dimmed, then lurid fires seemed to grow around him. He was suffocating, burning. He gasped, swaying, and his hand went to his throat.

Among the Outer Planets, mindcontrol emping was still regarded as something of a psychological curiosity, by some considered a spin-off of bioengineering, by others perhaps a new flowering of the human spirit. Its full potentialities were untested and unknown, and so far there had been no hint of its appearance amongst likely enemies. There had therefore been no incentive to train, to increase the talent in those who possessed it, by, for instance, pitting one against the other. On the contrary, since fear and distrust were the more

normal response to its appearance, Makettrig and his sort had been schooled in the opposite direction, to restraint.

So it was not surprising that now, finding himself in a sense ambushed, Makettrig was flung back in disarray. He retreated into himself, shuddering and dismayed. And like a black wedge of power the other's will sped after him, and again his sight dimmed. Yet he was also a soldier, and in other ways his spirit had not been untested; he rallied, calling his hate and ferocity to stiffen him. And for a time, through the utter silence in that room, there was a sense of mighty straining, while the two antagonists remained unmoving, un-speaking, their glances rigidly locked. But in the shock of his repulse Makettrig had in some sense retreated too far, for the blackness of the other's will began slowly to invade his mind again. And now it was as if a strong hand had taken grip of his heart, to squeeze and squeeze and squeeze, and he felt a cramp begin to bind his chest, agonizingly. The pain became rapidly unendurable. A groan was wrenched from him.

Behind him, Mbala, at first appalled by the meaning of the scene they had interrupted, had nevertheless remained basically confident that Makettrig would be able to 'magic' this enemy as easily as he had the others. But now, hearing him groan, and seeing how he swayed on his feet, she gave an involuntary cry.

'Makettrig!'

In his agony, he scarcely heard her, and his opponent remained totally concentrated. With a moan of despair she launched herself past Makettrig's slowly drooping figure, her arms outstretched, her fingers curving. Her nails raked down Shams's face. Immediately, the feeling of constriction within Makettrig's chest was relieved. For a second he stood bemused, swaying and shaking his head, aware only of a blessed relief from pain. Then Mbala shrieked, and the terror in her voice instantly focused his gaze on her. Shams, he saw, had recovered from the shock of her attack and now had his hands on each of her wrists, twisting them so that she was being

gradually forced to crouch before him. And all the time he was staring into her eyes.

The knowledge of what must be happening, she, unlike him, being wholly defenceless, for a moment froze Makettrig with horror—for a moment, then he leaped at Shams. But even as he did so she screamed again, then slumped, then the side of his hand sliced against Shams's neck with a sound like the sudden snap of a stick. Shams teetered, his head lolling, then slowly folded on himself and slid to the floor. At once, Makettrig's glance sought Mbala. She was lying on her back, her eyes open and watching him, her hands clutching at her stomach. Her lips moved, but no sound came. The voiceless appeal in her eyes was almost more than he could bear and his heart seemed to burst with rage and sorrow. For he could see that Shams had hurt her gravely; and though he knew now that he had a similar power to inflict damage, he had no power to undo it; by a process analogous to the appearance of stigmata in certain rare persons he could cure himself, but not others. Never in his life had he felt so helpless, known such black despair. And then he remembered, with sudden hope, how Lilamani had cured her before, and himself. She had the power. He stooped and stroked Mbala's forehead.

'Don't be afraid. He can't hurt you again and I won't leave you.' Then he fixed his gaze on her pleading, suffering eyes and gently sent forth his will.

'Sleep.'

Her eyes closed.

He turned away from her, went to the figure still lying limply on the table and tore away the basket work covering its head. He had already known it was Lilamani, for she was still wearing her rose-red tunic and trousers, but at the sight of her now his despair returned doubly. For her dark face was totally, shockingly blank, like a beautiful mask cut by a sculptor without a soul. And yet the eyes were open and staring, staring upward unmovingly. He passed his hand

across them, but the fixed glazed stare remained unchanged. He shook her, slapped her cheeks—and she still gave no sign whatsoever of being aware of his presence. He put his ear to her chest and was to some extent relieved to hear the double thump of her heart; at least her body seemed to be surviving.

Telling himself that there was still hope, that however he felt he must act to save them, he turned away from her and stood listening.

The long hush of that windless night was continuing and, knowing that after this he would never again remember it with pleasure, he smelt the pine scent yet again, wafting through the broken window. From somewhere distant up the mountain a coughing roar echoed, but otherwise there was not a sound to be heard. Still tensely listening, he looked at his ring watch. Although during his contest with Shams an age seemed to have passed, it was in fact only a minute or two since he had burst into this room—time enough, however, for someone, if there were anyone, to have come to investigate; there had been noise enough. Or had other inhabitants been warned to expect that from this torture chamber? The silence remained unbroken. After reassuring himself by another look at Lilamani that at least her condition seemed static, he left the room for the central hall and rapidly flung open the other doors, finding more rooms like the one he had left, all empty. He returned to the first room, glanced at his watch again: twenty minutes before the sentries on his room at Mawingo were relieved, before his escape would almost certainly be discovered. He raised his wrist communicator to his lips.

‘Seven-Double-Seven. Emergency. Lift and home on this signal. Proceed at maximum velocity, minimum height. Repel all attacks as necessary. Acknowledge.’

‘Acknowledged,’ the orb’s miniaturized voice replied. ‘Lifting now.’

‘Report reaction to your lift off.’

There was a pause, then, ‘No new activity observed.’ A

further pause, then, 'Beyond visual range of aerospaceport. No new activity observed.'

He relaxed slightly. Then his glance fell on Shams's still figure.

It was lying half on its back, half on its side, and its head was lolled at an angle which could only mean that the neck was broken. Makettrig had not consciously intended to kill him outright. He did not regret having done so, he was glad, but he was aware nevertheless of a very slight qualm; because Mboya and Ngala were influential men and would certainly represent this as murder. But the Hierarchy would back and protect him, he felt sure, for to them the torture alone would be an unforgivable crime, once they heard about it—assuming he could escape from this hateful planet and tell them.

And then, still regarding that grotesquely twisted figure, he had the biggest shock of his life.

For though its neck was broken, must be broken with its head lying like that, its eyes snapped open as he watched—to stare at him with a malignancy which was all the more frightful for coming from a body which should be dead. With deep revulsion, in spite of his earlier qualm, with the unthinking, instinctive reaction that an Earthman would have shown on meeting a poisonous snake, Makettrig raised his foot and stamped downwards. But even as his heel descended towards those glaring, hate-filled eyes, Shams's body flickered—and disappeared. And where the skull should have been his heel met—nothing.

The echoing stamp of his foot on the floor mingled with the sharp crack of imploding air.

Chapter Nine

I—PULSED JET MODE

In Number Six screen, by convention automatically giving a view of the quadrant ventral to the axis of flight, the trees of the forest passed in slow procession from top to bottom, their leaves palely shining in the moonlight, the tips of their tallest branches all but brushing the orb's dark hull as it drifted above them like an errant balloon. Floating on anti-grav with its paragrav on, Seven-Double-Seven was a minuscule world on its own and Makettrig, standing upright within the circle of the control console, was subject to its interior laws, not those of Earth; to him, the planet had slewed, not the orb as it had tilted on its axis to fire its plasma drive in a direction parallel to the forest floor, and in Number Four screen, now, the mountain peak seemed to lie on its side, like a finger pointing back warningly. At present, the orb was circling the mountain, winding in and out among the gulleys and ridges, meticulously following the same contour. Treetop was about half a kilometre behind.

Slow and clumsy an orb might be within a Zone of Prohibition, but even in the clammy embrace of this world's envelope Seven-Double-Seven was capable of greater speeds than this: on this first leg of his escape, however, Makettrig was keener to hide than to run. The soles of his feet felt the throb of the drive in its pulsed jet mode as they trod the deck lightly—lightly because the orb's internal paragrav system was adjusted to an equivalent of one-tenth g; enough to keep the figures of Lilamani and Mbala resting gently

supine. He had laid them on the deck, not in the cubicles, partly because he had had time to do little else, but more because at this stage he dared not leave his post and he wanted them where he could see them. He still hoped that Lilamani might recover soon and be able to apply herself to the cure of Mbala. Under his present tension, he felt desperately anxious for both. He knew now that if either died he would suffer a personal loss—perhaps more so in the case of Lilamani; for in spite of Mbala's unconcealed love, he felt that Lilamani, who knew what he was, was more his sort—she had judged him correctly once; if she died he would complete his duty to her. But right now there were other thoughts to engage him more urgently than the complexities of his emotional involvements and affinities.

Allowing his glance to switch aside from his tense watching of the screens to rest for a moment on the two still figures, his memory flicked backwards, a brief journey of minutes to that other moment of high tension while he had stood in the moonlit glade, well away from the great tree, with the janitor beside him and the women at their feet.

The impact of Shams's sudden and total disappearance had been considerable, yet reason had mitigated it to some extent. For, as his uncle, Roland, had reminded him during that interview before he had first met Lilamani, recent experiments in the metapsychological laboratories of Titan had uncovered a new attribute in the form of teleportation—uncovered? new? What about the legends from earlier ages? And wasn't psiE, stripped of the jargon, a thing almost as wonderful? Very evidently Shams had the attribute—was that what Lilamani had meant when she had warned him, on the very first day of the mission, that the man had 'powers'? He, Makettrig, had felt so superior then! Why couldn't she have been more explicit? Or had she feared his disbelief?

So his thoughts had run, and his deductions had increased his already strong sense of urgency; for it had been reasonable to assume that Shams had reappeared amongst his

friends the moment after he had vanished from the room in Treetop, which would have alerted them to the fact that their plans had misfired rather earlier than Makettrig had feared. And though Shams's neck might have been broken, his spinal cord had obviously remained intact, and Makettrig had felt he must also assume that Shams had the power of self-healing which he himself possessed; that therefore the full facts would very soon be known, even if the flight of the orb itself had not yet been discovered.

He had wasted no time.

Even as his mind still reverberated to the shock of that disappearance, he had flung himself down the stairs to the janitor's room and, as it were, reactivated the man to his service and with his driven help carried the two women out into the open.

It had seemed a long, tense wait. Yet the distance from the port to the glade could not have been above ten kilometres and in fact it had been little more than a minute or two before the orb's black shape was a swelling hole in the sky above the trees. It had sunk softly and silently into the hush of the glade, its port already dilated, its ladder extruded as it touched down.

Again with the janitor's help, he had carried the women into the orb, then dismissed the man, back to his sleep of forgetfulness. The orb had lifted without incident and, so far, there had been no sign of pursuit.

So far.

He returned his attention tensely to the screens.

Assuming the worst, that his escape was already known, he judged it would have been fatal to have tried a direct ascent; his immediate aim, therefore, was to remove himself as surreptitiously as possible, at least from out of sight of the town and its port. The light amplification devices embodied in the orb's optical sensors enabled him to see the forest as if it were broad daylight and, until now, it had been an unbroken carpet draping the gulleys and ridges of the moun-

tain's shoulders, without hint of a break, or a glade. A few moments ago, the orb had swung away from the mountain, following the forest over the first of several larger ridges which buttressed the main massif. That had been a moment of danger. For the orb had necessarily mounted a skyline, visible from Treetop, if not from Nanyuki and beyond. But now that same skyline was rising behind, as, still following the contour, the orb angled along the nearer wall of a broad gulley, back into the mountain. The far side of the gulley, however, was walled by another ridge, equally high, which would have to be crossed—a moment of greater danger. For by now, surely, the search must be on.

The orb swung out from the mountain again as it began to circumnavigate the opposite ridge and Makettrig's glance searched the screens tautly. The view of the forest ahead which their appropriate sensors were able to scan was from this height limited; but they showed the trees marching over the skyline of the ridge and, search as he might, he still could find no sign of a break in their ranks. Slowly, that skyline closed in, falling steeply down to where, inevitably on this course, the orb must cross it.

Briefly, Makettrig turned his attention to Numbers Two and Three screens, giving views aft of his general course. There, too, the skyline was sinking fast. Suddenly, winking into sight from round the limb of the mountain, a single point of light appeared, several more, a cluster. Nanyuki. In Numbers One and Four screens the ridge ahead was still angling down from above, so at least the orb was not as yet silhouetted—though Makettrig could think of several different forms of sensor to which the plasma drive would act like a flare. As if on cue, the alarm hammered.

DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG!

'Energy source detected,' the orb announced, its sweetly calm tones grotesquely contrasting the sudden clangour. 'Range: eight hundred metres. Bearing: one-zero-one degrees . . . Object in visual contact.'

Near a planetary surface, bearings were given in relation to the axis of flight; Makettrig's glance searched Number Two screen, found a slim, oval outline occulting the sky's starglow.

'Lock on. Magnify.'

The image slid to the centre of the screen, rapidly grew in size. Its shape did not remain constant, but swelled and shrank, suddenly became almost circular, shrank, swelled again. The sequence was repeated. A 'magship', he thought, remembering how another such had made rings round the orb during its descent to the planet. Banking and circling. Searching? Yes, because eight hundred metres was about right for the present direct line distance to Treetop. Now a similar machine rose into view to join the other and its outline also began to change rhythmically. Also searching, both probably spiralling out from the glade. Which must mean they hadn't yet realized he had made contact with his orb, so little time had passed since his invasion of that room in Treetop—indeed if Lydia still thought she had his communicator safe, they very likely hadn't bothered to keep a watch on it at night.

The magships were not warcraft and he doubted if their sensory equipment had more than visual or radar capabilities; nevertheless . . .

'Cut the drive. Reduce all energy emissions to minimum necessary to maintain sensory and gravity systems intact.'

The softly glowing light disc in the dome of the control chamber dimmed, winked out, and the almost inaudible, thrumming whisper of the drive ceased; the orb drifted on under its own momentum, like a black bubble in a languid current. In the darkened control chamber, Makettrig's face shone palely in the light of the screens as he turned his attention to the forward view, aware, though the orb had reduced its energy output to the minimum, that there were still sources within it which could be detected by sensitive enough equipment—and he could not be certain that those

two craft were not so equipped—and there was still that skyline to cross. This was the classic situation which every warden feared, the very situation which only days ago he had boasted to Lilamani would never come about; he almost felt glad she was unaware of what was happening—or was she so unaware? Her eyes were open, still unmoving, still staring. Might she not be in some state of paralysis, unable to speak, unable to direct her vision, but seeing and hearing nevertheless?

With his mouth set even more grimly and wishing as never before for the freedom of space, to be away from the clutch of this planet's mass, where he would have time to attend to her, he continued his search of the screens.

The leafy tips flowed down them, slowly and more slowly as the orb lost way. But it had enough momentum yet to float itself over the ridge. Though it would mean surrendering what little initiative he had and he was still too near Treetop, he began to consider whether he should descend and hide among the trees with all energy sources dead. But then, at last, he found what he had been looking for: a break like a chasm among the trees.

During his ride with Mbala he had learned that the forest was interrupted at intervals by long, straight, artificial clearings, such as they had ridden through on the mountainside that day, which acted as firebreaks. This one was to the right of his present course and lower down the mountain, but seemed to follow the contours at its level. He said:

'Manual override.'

Two gimballed levers projecting from a fascia of the control console directly in front of him glowed a deep, cherry red. With his finger tips, delicately, he touched both. The thrumming whisper of the drive sounded for a fraction of a second, ceased; the scene in the screens swirled and steadied as the orb began to drift directly towards the cleft in the forest. His glance shifted from screen to screen: the magships were still circling smoothly. The orb floated on,

like a huge spore in the moonlight, then the edge of the cut passed beneath it. His hands moved slightly. The orb sank.

Almost immediately, the control chamber rang screechingly as the momentum of the orb's considerable mass carried it against the further wall of the cut and twigs, branches and the very boles of the trees themselves scraped, bent and snapped against the hull. The forward screens were suddenly darkened by a tangle of leaves and splintered wood. Apart from the appalling noise, he felt nothing, for the orb's internal paragrav system protected him and the two women from the shock of the impact. He stood before the screens, unshaken, knowing that the orb's almost impregnable metaplast hull could withstand collisions far greater than this without damage. His fingers touched the controls again and broken wood rasped on the hull as the orb rotated to reverse the direction of its drive. Number One screen cleared. Again his fingers moved and the orb, its drive flaring, eased itself back into the cut. In Number Four screen branches in the stream of the plasma jet shrivelled and glowed. He set the orb driving down the straight line of the cut, his glance flicking from the fore to the aft screen with startled wonder, for the fire which the jet had started was rapidly growing into a holocaust and he had never seen a naked flame before, let alone an uncontrolled conflagration. Reason, no recent rain and the fact of the fire breaks in an oxygen-bearing atmosphere gave him the answer, and his wonder changed to alarm as he realized there would shortly be a volume of energy emission there sufficient to alert the dullest sensor. He increased the power of the drive and the orb hurtled down the cut, just skimming its grassy floor, like a giant bowling ball in a narrow alley, its hull ringing deafeningly and almost continuously as it crashed through branches projecting into the cut, or swept aside whole trees where it narrowed. It breasted the ridge and hurled down the following slope, leaped a narrow valley and, still following the line of the cut, swept over the succeeding ridge.

The ridge sank into a steeply sloping plain, the cut continuing across it like a narrow belt securing the mountain's apron of forest. Suddenly and almost without warning the plain was intersected by a precipitous rock face. The orb leaped high. Instantly, he cut the drive, letting the orb continue under its own momentum.

The comparatively smooth plain had ended, the screens showed, and ahead a complex of gulleys channelled down the mountain from the peaks. To the rear a great mass of roiling smoke reflected a lambent glare, silhouetting the limb of the mountain. The fire must have spread with phenomenal speed, but he was now sufficiently far from it for the flames themselves to be below his horizon—as were the magships and Nanyuki. Could he risk an ascent from here? The orb drifting on, now at a height of a hundred metres above the treetops, he searched the mountain slope ahead for a certain pronounced feature which he remembered seeing during that first descent on Nanyuki. It had been on the far side of the mountain from the town; it should be coming up shortly. *There*, he thought, as a prominent ridge of rock lifted over his immediate horizon, reaching from high in the moorland well down into the wooded slopes; its jagged summits split the forest apart like a spine showing through fur. His hands still on the manual override controls he skimmed the orb over it, swirled it on its axis, to hover over a gulley like a chasm.

Looking down then up, the gulley began as a broad re-entrant, narrowing as it climbed, until among the moorland it was little more than a deep ditch—but even there, he judged, deep enough to take the twenty-one-point-three metres of the orb's diameter. He sank the orb into the gulley and returned it to its own control, ordering it to follow the feature up, keeping as close to its floor as the terrain and the vegetation allowed. In the screens, the trees which covered the gulley's walls began to tilt—as he saw them—from the near horizontal to the near vertical as the orb's axis itself tilted

in its climb up the steepening slope. The orb floated on upwards, hugging the depths between the gulley's narrowing walls.

Abruptly, the forest ended and a new sort of vegetation showed itself in the screens: huge heathers and heaths displaying a gigantism curious to Earthmen if not to Maketrig, to whom all plants were equally strange. The steepness of the slope fell off sharply, became almost level; a patch of white floated by on the screens, then another, then quite suddenly all the ground beneath the orb was covered in white, shimmering faintly in the dim moonlight. The gulley, by now, had diminished to a shallow depression emerging from a cleft between two sharp peaks pronging the stars. At this height, the stars burned more brightly, more steadily, and the sky between them was black. Here, convex slopes hid all the lands beyond and the glittering sky enfolded the mountain top; it was an island in a glittering sea.

He directed the orb through the cleft and it entered an irregularly shaped amphitheatre surrounded by jagged rock masses: the last extrusions of the mountain's volcanic spine. The wild, harsh shapes (in the thin air of these heights keenly outlined), the sparkling snow fields, the black rocks, together compounded an austere beauty more familiar to his sight than anything he had so far seen on this planet and he felt a fleeting pang of nostalgia for the mountains of Titan. Then he began to tense himself for the next leg of the flight.

For thus far, in spite of those moments of danger, the mountain had protected him; but now he was about to launch the orb into the open and the sky above was clear, not a wraith of the vapours which so frequently hid this planet showing. And though the orb had lifted through the thicker part of the atmosphere, there were some thousands of kilometres of ascent yet to the limit of the Zone of Prohibition. His glance rested considerably on the four guns which bulked within their cages in each quadrant of the control chamber. They had two modes of operation: as

Lasers; and as Disruptors. The Disruptor mode was a new thing. Unloosing sub-atomic bonds, it could cut a swathe through a city, punch a hole to the molten core of the planet; even in war, it was a last resort weapon. The Laser mode was less destructive, more precise in application, and Titan was not at war with Earth.

‘Superimpose gunsights. Laser mode.’

The circle and crossed hairline of the gun sights flicked into being on the four screens giving an all round view in the plane of the control chamber.

‘Vertical ascent. Maximum acceleration.’

The deck began to thrum to the pulse of the drive; in the screens, the surrounding peaks slid downwards with gathering speed as the orb lobbed itself up like a bomb out of a monster howitzer. The mountain fell away. Makettrig’s glance darted from screen to screen, rhythmically, suddenly steadied as tiny points of light appeared on one of them. Nanyuki. And its port beyond. And in the centre of the level expanse of the port, activity of some sort.

‘Magnify. Number Two screen.’

The scene on that screen swelled. His hand on a vernier control, he tracked the view. Equipment of some sort. A missile launcher? The orb itself would sense, track and destroy a missile long before it came within effective range. But if it were something else, the orb not having the judgment to distinguish with sufficient precision an object on a planetary surface, then he must be the gunner. The parabolic dish of a sensing device was circling. It hesitated, hunted, steadied and now he was looking directly into it. A tube lifted, showed a crystalline glint. Laser. His hands leaped to a gun control. The gun sight on Number Two screen tracked. A thin, brilliant shaft of light lanced from the orb down. On the ground metal flared and figures exploded away from the equipment, running. He continued to watch for a moment, saw he had shorn the tube in half and no sign of a casualty, then returned to his tense scanning of all the screens. The

planet's surface was falling away rapidly now and even the enlarged view of the space port was shrinking fast as the plasma drive functioned with increasing efficiency in the quickly rarifying air.

In Number Three, the aft, screen the horizon had completed its circle, the planet was a huge, dark disc, and now round its eastern limb a golden arch grew, flared, then the sun bounded into view in the instant dawn of space flight.

DONG-DONG-DONG-DONG!

'Energy source detected,' the orb announced sweetly. 'Range one thousand, one hundred kilometres. Approaching on intercept course.'

Makettrig was suddenly icy calm: this was what he had been expecting; it had been virtually inevitable. He said evenly, 'Estimate range to limit of Zone of Prohibition.'

'Three hundred kilometres.'

'Estimate range to point of interception of trajectories.'

'Four hundred and fifty-four kilometres.'

'Count down to limit of Zone. Light your Cauldron on achievement of limit.'

'Two hundred and fifty kilometres,' the orb almost instantly intoned. And then after a few seconds, 'Incoming message.'

'Relay.'

A man's harsh voice filled the control chamber. 'Calling the Titanian sphere. Calling the Titanian sphere. Acknowledge contact.'

'Contact acknowledged,' Makettrig said curtly into the air. 'Seven-Double-Seven, for you only. Lock on with Maser scan and display.'

Instantly, a shape like an ill-balanced dumbbell filled Number One screen, its forward sphere speckled with gun blisters. The flare of a vast ion jet shafted away from the trailing sphere as the craft angled in from superior orbit.

Again, the harsh voice sounded. 'This is the Earth corvette

Kenyatta. I have information that you are assisting the escape of a wanted criminal. Cut your drive and prepare to match orbits for boarding manoeuvre.'

'Two hundred kilometres,' the orb's voice interposed sweetly.

Makettrig remained silent.

The voice sounded again, gratingly. 'Titanian sphere, Titanian sphere, did you receive my last transmission? Acknowledge.'

'Acknowledged. Transmission received but not understood. I have a passenger who is a Mercurian national in transit from Titan. She is under the protection of the Hierarchy. I refuse permission to board.'

'My orders are to board and arrest your passenger. Cut your drive, or I fire.'

'My other passenger,' Makettrig added calmly, knowing that every second he could delay was literally being counted by the orb, 'is Mbala, daughter of Kipkurgat. If you fire, you kill her too.'

This time, there was a more lengthy pause, during which the orb said :

'One hundred and fifty kilometres.'

Then the other voice sounded again. 'My information is that Mbala Kipkurgat is no longer living. If she is alive, initiate visual contact and let me see her.'

Which meant, Makettrig thought, that Shams was in play again. So he thought he had killed her, did he? His glance rested bleakly on Mbala's limp form. She was still breathing, but he was certainly not going to wake her to pain before Lilamani could attend to her.

'She's hurt. Seriously,' he said, and now his voice also had begun to grate. 'Both my passengers are the victims of criminal assault. I charge the man called Shams with attempted murder.'

'Cut your drive,' the voice repeated abruptly. 'Or I open fire.'

'That would be an act of war. This is a battle orb of Titan and I formally warn you that this interchange is being recorded.'

'You have already opened fire.'

'In self-defence. I observed no casualties.'

'You opened fire. Cut your drive, or I fire. This is your last warning.'

'One hundred kilometres,' the orb said.

Makettig hesitated for the second or two's grace which he judged the other must give him. His hand reached towards a gun control, then paused. In the Laser mode, his guns would be hopelessly outclassed by the other's; but in the Disruptor mode . . . No, the situation wasn't yet as desperate as that and his training in the principle of Minimum Force remained paramount. Furthermore, the orb had now achieved a considerable velocity.

'Cut the drive, Seven-Double-Seven.'

Immediately, the thrum of the drive was hushed and for some seconds there was no sound at all in the control chamber. Then the orb's sweetly neutral tones began to count the diminishing distance from the limit of the Zone at regular and more frequent intervals.

'Ninety kilometres . . . eighty . . . seventy . . .'

Makettig's glance flicked to the screen displaying the corvette's image. Numerals superimposed on the edge of the screen were flickering in descending order of magnitude: the craft was closing fast now.

'Raise the plotting tank,' he ordered abruptly.

In the plotting tank, the image of the planet's limb swelled out, surrounded by a deep, reddish nimbus. Within that nimbus a green spark was moving slowly towards its outer limit, while a red spark beyond it traced a slowly curving path, which he could see would now touch the orb's trajectory only just beyond the Zone of Prohibition. And, compared to the orb, the corvette was huge, having considerable mass with its own small Zone of Prohibition; in

its near neighbourhood the orb must automatically douse the Cauldron and that would further reduce the window of space from which he could fling. The harsh voice of the corvette commander abruptly interrupted his thoughts.

'I am now matching orbits. Prepare to receive my boarding tube.'

Makettig's glance flicked to the screen. The craft was still some hundreds of metres distant. Aware now that it was a matter of his instant response to the orb's precise measurements, he ordered it to cut paragrav. He let his glance rest briefly on the figures of the two women and saw that the resilience of their flesh was drifting them away a centimetre or so from the deck. But the movement was so slow and so gentle that it could not have harmed them. Knowing that the sight of them would distract him, he looked away, let his gaze become unfocused and concentrated entirely on his hearing.

'... fifty ... forty ... thirty ...'

He began to gather his will and desire.

'... five ... three—two—one—zero. Cauldron alight.'

He flung.

The image of the corvette flicked off the screen.

II—CRYS-S-STAL

Glowing spheres represented the sun and the three inner planets in the plotting tank now and a green thread of light showed the orb's computation of its present trajectory. Makettig turned away from the display with a sigh: his first fling from the neighbourhood of the corvette had been wild—necessarily, for Mercury was sunward and he had flung from the night side of Earth in a direction almost diametrically opposite. But now, for the first time since leaving the asteroid, he was on course again for Mercury. And no

Earth-built ship would be able to catch him. And now, at last, he had time to attend to the two women.

He had re-applied paragrav with just enough strength to drift them back to the deck and they were lying much as they had been before the start of his flings. He bent over Mbala first.

Her black skin had a waxen look and her cheeks seemed to have sunk since he had last examined her. He felt her pulse; it was weak and irregular. He had hoped that by putting her into a painless sleep her body would have had a chance to recover a little; but he could not hide from himself the fact that her condition had visibly deteriorated. With a resurgence of his feeling of anxious urgency, which perforce he had suppressed during his flings, he turned to Lilamani.

Her wide open eyes still stared rigidly upwards. He brought his own eyes close to look deeply into hers; but he could detect no change, no faintest flicker, to show that she was aware of him.

He had begun an emp of her before; she and he also had an affinity, of that he was certain. Perhaps if he could emp her now . . . The eyes were the gateway of the soul in the sense that they directed its field of attention. But if its attention were elsewhere . . . Why had Shams used the psychoprobe on her?—a man with his apparent powers should not have needed to use a machine. Unless in some sense she had been too strong for him? Had he finally gone too far, let the thing damage her brain, so that she was now no more than a vegetable? For a moment, Makettrig's imaginings usurped reality and a paroxysm of hatred bereft him of rational thought, and although Shams had so nearly defeated him he hoped with all his raging heart that he would meet the man again. But such feelings were no help to the women. With difficulty, he mastered himself, forcing himself to think sanely, and as he continued to look into Lilamani's eyes his reason suggested that that unwavering, unvarying stare was a sign, not of laxness, but of tension, as if she were

locked in some inward, inflexibly defensive stance. In which case, he thought, there was hope, because then he, a friend, might be able to command her out of it. He put forth his will . . .

Not Makettrig, not any mindcontrol emper had been able to put into words how their power functioned. There was conscious volition, but thereafter it operated subliminally—at how deep a level no one had so far discovered. There was, however, an awareness of contact. Now, as Makettrig reached out with his will, he had no feeling of contact; it was as if he were trying to pierce through layer after layer of . . . *softness*. His forehead became damp with the intensity of his indescribable effort. Then, at last, a tendril of his mind seemed to touch—*something*.

‘Come back, Lilamani,’ he said, his voice scarcely more than a hoarse whisper. ‘Wake.’

For an instant he thought he had succeeded; but if he had it was only in part, for the pupils of her eyes began to show a slight, fast tremor. Nastigmus. Then her lips slowly parted, as slowly came together again. Again, they just visibly moved. He put his ear close to them and could just distinguish a thread of sound, a breathy whisper, no more.

‘Crys-s-stal.’

Then her lips shut, her eyes still showing that small, quick trembling from side to side.

He straightened himself. He could only think of one thing she could have meant, though it seemed to him a strange way to refer to it. He climbed up to her cubicle.

The case was beside her bunk. He lifted it—and was somewhat surprised; it was far heavier than from its small size he had expected. It was locked and there was a plate beside the catch which he guessed was sensitive to her fingers only, for it did not respond to his. He took it down to her, lifted her hand and pressed her fingertips against the plate. The lid flew open.

Again he was surprised, and also slightly dismayed, for in

place of the expected thing, he found what appeared to be a solid block of crystalline material filling the case to its brim. The substance seemed to glow with a milky white radiance of its own and in its depths tiny sparkles gleamed with that same strange quality of self-luminescence which shone from the crystal eyes of her golden skull. But where, in that case, did she keep the ornament—or whatever it was. Then he noticed two small tabs at each end of the block. He pulled at them and a thin slab lifted out, to expose a further block of the same stuff. In this one, however, a niche had been cut to accept the contours of the circlet and its skull so exactly that at first sight the gold seemed to be inlaid in the crystal. More tabs enabled him to ease the circlet out of its bed.

This was the first time that he had been able to examine it closely, and he saw that it was not in fact solid gold, as he had imagined, but seemed to be made chiefly of the same substance as the crystal block, its inner surface, which would rest against her forehead and skull, being naked and only the outer veneered with the metal. Was this what she needed? Or the crystal slab in the case? Because they were eyes of a sort and he knew the power of eyes, he tried first facing the skull towards her and shining its crystal eyes into hers. There was no observable result. Next, since she wore it so often and this way there would be physical contact, he raised her head and placed the circlet on her brow. For several seconds nothing happened. And then, slowly, her eyes began to steady, became at last still. She blinked once.

‘Makettrig,’ she said in her normal voice.

She sat up and her gaze travelled round the control chamber. He said nothing, feeling it best to let her orientate herself in spite of his anxiety for Mbala, watching the crystals in the golden skull flash as her head moved, and wondering. For what property, he asked himself, could such an inanimate thing have to recall her where he had all but failed? At length, declining his help, she got to her feet.

She had risen in view of one of the star-bespeckled screens. Her glance fell on it.

'So we're in space.'

'Yes. In orbit for Mercury. How do you feel? Are you all right?'

She did not answer his question, but looked down on Mbala. 'Shams?' she asked simply.

'Yes,' he said urgently. 'He did something to her. Don't know what, but she was in pain. So I put her to sleep.'

'So you put her to sleep.'

Remembering a previous occasion, he gave her a sharp look. She was frowning slightly. He said, 'I had to. She was in pain. Terrible pain. There was nothing else I could do. Her only hope is you. I've been trying to rouse you.'

'I've been . . . away. But I was aware of you trying to reach me, Makettrig. You have power. How long has she been like this? You must tell what's been happening.'

He gave her a hurried account of the events leading up to her rescue and thereafter. 'Now she seems worse than she was,' he ended. 'I don't think you've much time.'

'Makettrig, in escaping Shams's attack I had to retreat . . . elsewhere.' She studied him for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to say more than that; but his thoughts were very obviously wholly on Mbala. She continued, 'By torturing my body with that machine, he tried to bring me back and my powers are depleted. I don't think I'll be able to do anything for her, until we reach Mercury. Better to leave her asleep.'

He said tensely, 'Look at her. Feel her pulse. She won't last until then. You must try. Please. Now.'

She knelt beside Mbala, touching her forehead and her wrists, then looked up, letting her gaze rest on him expressionlessly. 'You'll have to wake her first.'

He leaned over Mbala and said softly, 'Wake now.'

Her eyes opened. She stared up at him and smiled, then her face suddenly contorted. She uttered a little whimper.

Lilamani pushed him aside and took his place. The seconds lengthened into minutes as she bent over the other; but at length she straightened herself and one look at Mbala's pain-twisted features told him she had failed. Yet refusing to believe it, he examined Lilamani's face searchingly for some sign of hope in her expression. Her cheeks were beaded with sweat and even the crystals in the golden skull seemed to have lost some of their light.

'Put her to sleep,' she said harshly.

'No, Makettrig!' Mbala half raised her head from the deck, then let it fall with a groan. 'No, Makettrig. Do not make me sleep. I am dying. The pain will not last long and I do not want to die in my sleep. Stay with me, Makettrig. Help me to die.'

And then, looking down into her eyes and seeing the mute appeal in them, and remembering that it was for his sake that she had come by this mortal hurt, he found himself wishing most desperately to share her suffering. And he knew there was a very intimate way in which he could do that; that he might even be able to bring her to know that her pain was being shared.

So he looked deeply into her eyes and let the tendrils of his mind reach out to touch hers.

The scene somersaulted . . .

Eyes.

Beloved eyes looking down from beneath the fiery hair.

Why does he not speak.

Ah! This pain! Rushing rivers of fire. A thousand knives slicing.

The alien half saw and felt, co-suffered; knew an agony and a despair and a terror such as it had never before known and almost recoiled. But held fast. Yet its presence remained unknown. And becoming aware of that need for recognition, which became a tearing desire, it became aware of itself; aware of the other as a separate entity in the body it shared.

I am here. I am with you. Know me.

A sudden extreme joy swamped and negated the pain which both entities shared.

You are my old friend. I know you.

Two souls naked to each other within the same housing acknowledged and recognized each other; became each aware of long pasts, often shared.

We will meet again.

We will meet again.

But now this body is dying. You must go lest I take you with me

I will stay.

No. For you there is a duty still to be done. Go now. We will meet again.

Reluctantly, the alien half retreated and the scene somersaulted.

Makettrig looked down into Mbala's smiling eyes. Her lips moved to issue a final faintest whisper.

'Good-bye, Makettrig.'

Her eyes closed.

Makettrig remained kneeling beside her for a few seconds longer, then rose to his feet, his face stony.

'What had that man done to her?'

'I'm not sure. It seemed to me her intestines were in a mess—too much so for me—by myself—to untangle. It's his way to make death painful—he caused her brother's death. He was the direct cause of that crash. That was a trap, after all, Makettrig—you didn't tell me how he got away from you.'

Makettrig described the incident.

She nodded. 'I tried to warn you. I told you he had powers, but I was afraid to say more than that. I wasn't—I wasn't sure about you then, and I didn't think you'd believe me.'

'But we know about teleportation on Titan. Not much, but a little. Been experiments.'

She looked surprised. 'Perhaps you're further advanced

than I'd guessed. I thought that only—' She checked herself, gave him a quick look then continued, 'They took me just after I'd seen you—after your accident. Shams was waiting for me in Treetop. He boasted to me then that he'd teleported himself onto their craft. He made them change course and crash and forget—but who better than you will know how he did that . . .

'I see you shared her pain. You have courage, Makettrig. That was well done, because I think she loved you.'

He was silent for some moments, then he said sadly, 'It seems she and I were old friends, after all. We've known each other before. I shared her dying moments, yes; but that was the true origin of our affinity.' He gave her a long, steady look, then said slowly, 'We also have an affinity, Lila-mani.'

She said nothing.

'Isn't it time you gave me some sort of explanation? Such as who, or what, Shams is? And if he could teleport to Mbala's craft, why didn't he do it to us?'

As on a previous occasion once, her gaze became abstracted. Then she said, 'I can tell you some things now, I think. He—'

But her sentence was never completed, for at that moment the control chamber rang to the sudden, strident clangour of the alarm.

III—MARBLES IN SPACE

In the plotting tank, the lines of the computed trajectories intersected precisely, but as the other object was moving at a velocity double that of Seven-Double-Seven's there was no danger of a collision. However, though in the satellite belt it was just possible that the ballistic trajectories of two objects should meet so very exactly, in this region it was highly im-

probable and Makettrig had already discarded coincidence. He turned his glance to Number Two screen.

At a range of some thousands of kilometres the object was too distant, its surface too dark and unreflective to be adequately detected by the optical sensors, even with image intensification; the shape on the screen was the result of maser scanning. Lilamani was also watching it.

'Isn't that a battle orb?'

'It is.'

'Then why the alarm?'

Makettrig spoke into the air. 'Answer, Seven-Double-Seven.'

'No identification exchange.'

'What does that mean?'

Makettrig surveyed the enigmatic shape of the other orb grimly.

Battling against similarly hostile environments, confronted alike by the black hegemony of the Inner Planets, the two systems of satellite worlds known as the Outer Planets were allied in so strong a confederacy that internecine strife among them was almost inconceivable. Hence the battle orbs, whether from the Jovian or Saturnian systems, were now equipped in each and every case with two particular automatic devices, one of which had quite newly been added as a result of a lesson learned during the recent Earth-Ganymedan war. It was the older and simpler of these two modifications, however, which had apparently failed to operate in the other orb.

'When battle orbs in flight come within range of each other's sensors,' he explained, 'they automatically exchange the identities of themselves and their pilots—unless specifically ordered not to. That one hasn't. So Seven-Double-Seven has assumed a malfunction—or hostility. Both grounds for alarm.'

He fell silent as the image of the other orb flicked from Number Two to Number One screen; it was well ahead now,

within seconds would be crossing the line of Seven-Double-Seven's trajectory.

'If it continues like that,' she asked, 'what's its destination?'

'The sun,' he replied laconically.

'I see.'

She continued to watch the screen as intently as he, and through the deep hush of the orb in its coasting flight he was aware of her slightly quickened breathing beside him. Suddenly, a slim, tenuous, grey cone flicked into being, extending from a limb of the grey sphere on the screen.

'Plasma drive,' he said.

After some seconds the cone disappeared as abruptly as it had come into being.

'The unknown orb,' Seven-Double-Seven's sweet voice reported, 'has matched its trajectory with mine.'

Almost immediately and for so brief an instant that it scarcely made an impression on their retinas, the image of the other orb shivered, its outline became hazy, then once again was clear and hard.

'Velocity change,' Seven-Double-Seven's voice instantly announced.

Makettrig nodded to himself: a 'reverse', he guessed. He flicked a glance aside at Lilamani; she was watching the screen with a frown of concentration, but otherwise showed no reaction.

Again, the image of the other orb shivered briefly, then immediately began to swell rapidly as Seven-Double-Seven simultaneously announced a further change in velocity. The image continued to grow then its outline shivered once again.

Seven-Double-Seven said, 'Velocity change. Velocity now matched with mine.'

The silence returned for some minutes, then :

'Incoming message. Visual and voice contact requested. Commander to Commander.'

'Commander to Commander', Makettrig thought. He looked at Lilamani again. 'Not how a warden would say it,' he

remarked. 'But you've already guessed who they are, I suppose. Shall we hear what they've got to say?'

She nodded.

He pointed to a small screen inset on the control console. 'I'll use that. No need for you to be seen. Stand over there and you'll be out of view.' He waited while she moved aside a couple of paces, then said, 'Accept contact, Seven-Double-Seven.'

The black, vaguely handsome features of a man with bold, flashing eyes were immediately framed by the screen: Councillor Mboya. The sound of his drawling voice filled the control chamber.

'Well, man, you certainly gave us some chase. But I guess it's over now. I'm here to tell you to turn back to Earth. You'll be given a fair trial. We've signalled ahead to Mercury. You won't be allowed to land. Man, you've no choice.'

From the corners of his eyes, Makettrig saw Lilamani raise her hand. He flicked a switch.

'You won't be heard.'

'He isn't speaking the truth. You'll be able to land on my part of the planet.'

'Right.' He touched the switch again and his cold glance scanned the screen. It showed Mboya's head and shoulders, only, but enough for Makettrig to see that he was clad in a space suit as far as his neck, the helmet only missing. His glance flicked to the equipment locker, where his own was stored, then returned to the other's face.

'Commander to Commander contact was requested,' he said, speaking evenly and precisely. 'You are not the Commander of that orb.'

'As of now, man, that's just what I am.'

'That is an Inner Planet craft. I do not accept you as its Commander. I will speak to the pilot, or no one.'

Mboya hesitated, looked over his shoulder, then obviously receiving an unspoken signal from somebody off screen,

shrugged and said, 'If that's the way you want it, I guess it makes no difference to us. Lydia girl, the screen's yours.'

His image was replaced by Lydia's fair features. And she also, Makettrig saw, was clad in a space suit, less its helmet. Her blue eyes were stonily hostile. She said through stiff lips, 'I've nothing to say to you, Makettrig, except that if you're wise you'll do as Councillor Mboya says.'

And this was the woman who had shared his childhood, Makettrig thought. Looking at her now, it was hard to believe that they had ever been friends. Had she fallen under Shams's influence? Or was it Mboya? Yet even though he still had it in him to find excuses for her, his duty as a warden was ineluctible and his expression grew very stern. He said with formal harshness and without looking away from the screen :

'Seven-Double-Seven, record for transmission to base . . . Lydia, I charge you with the misappropriation and illegal use of a Titan war craft. By the power vested in me as a warden, I order you to return forthwith to Titan and to surrender that orb to Warden Headquarters.'

For a moment he thought he detected the beginnings of dismay in her eyes, then they narrowed; but before she could say anything, a gauntleted hand, visibly trembling, stretched into view on the screen, clawed at her shoulder and plucked her aside. Ngala's wizened features replaced hers, his surrogate heart hidden this time by a space suit. For a moment or two, his wrinkled, liverish lips writhed wordlessly while his eyes snapped venom from out of the screen. Finally, he achieved a screeching start to the sort of diatribe which Makettrig had now come to expect from his lips.

'I knew we'd have nothing but trouble from you! I knew it! You're all alike, you wardens! I've said it before and I'll say it again. Nasty, interfering young men! Now, understand this! This machine has been sequestered by Earth. Sequestered! Do you understand? Sequestered! It is no longer under your control. And this woman, Lydia, is under our protection. She is no longer subject to your orders! So

let's have no more argument. You've abducted two women. You will return them to Earth.'

In the hope that she might not know the facts, Makettrig said more for Lydia's ears than for Ngala's, 'Mbala Kipkur-gat is dead. Murdered by Shams. Lilamani Lakshman Singh was being tortured. I interrupted Shams applying the psycho-probe to her—even by your laws that's illegal.'

'So you say. So you say. That can all be investigated when you return them to Earth. I order you to return them—or take the consequences!'

Makettrig spoke into the air. 'Seven-Double-Seven, cut contact.'

The screen went dead and he returned to watching the image of the other orb on Number One screen. It was now some tens of kilometres ahead, but otherwise its course and its velocity exactly matched Seven-Double-Seven's. Lydia and her passengers had been wearing space suits, ready to helmet up. In all warcraft that was a mark of preparation for battle. He wondered just how far she was prepared to go. Events had already shown she knew about the older of the two modifications which had been made to the orbs. But the new one? It had been made after her time as a cadet . . .

She would probably be content for the time being to keep station ahead of him, he thought; but what if he seemed about to manoeuvre? Though he knew he could outfling her with ease, if he wished, in a mood now of almost clinical curiosity, he decided to tease her into declaring herself. He said calmly :

'Seven-Double-Seven, apply maximum deflection at ninety degrees North of the ecliptic.'

In space no longer in the pulsed jet mode, the plasma drive's sound was no more than a whine. Almost instantly, Seven-Double-Seven's voice announced, 'Contact request from the unknown orb. Pilot to Pilot.'

'Contact refused.'

'Beam attack!' the orb's invariably, but sometimes so in-

appropriately, sweet voice announced swiftly on cue. 'Beam attack!'

Simultaneously on the screen a pale, pale beam of faintly sparkling light reached like a tenuous lance towards them—and passed by. It winked out. Again, it reached out—to pass on the other side. Makettrig's lips tightened. *In vacuo* the beam of a laser cannot be seen; but even in deepest space there are free atoms and this was a mark of their tiny explosions. The Disruptor, he thought: he hadn't guessed her ruthlessness, or her hatred, would go so deeply as that. His gaze icy, he watched the beam lick out from the other orb again, and yet again.

'Makettrig!' Lilamani's voice was little more than a whisper. 'Are you just going to wait until she hits us?'

Makettrig did not take his glance from the screen. He said coolly, 'Don't worry. All orbs have a safety device now which deflects their guns from each other—in battle they sometimes get in each other's line of fire. Lydia doesn't know that. Probably doesn't guess even now—never was a good shot . . . Right. I'm going to teach her a lesson. Isolate yourself. I'll tell you as soon as I've flung, because this may be a bit noisy. Be worse for them—Lydia won't have practised this sort of manoeuvre.'

He gave the orb a precise instruction, then gathered his will and desire, flung twice in rapid succession, and immediately alerted Lilamani. The plasma drive's whine began to sound at intervals as the orb made small, but infinitely exact course corrections. In the screen the image of the other orb began to grow rapidly.

'Why doesn't she fling to avoid you?' Lilamani asked suddenly.

'Doubt if she can,' he replied grimly. 'For two reasons: unlike me with you, she has to drug her passengers. Takes a little time. And by now she'll have panicked and been struck dumb—lost the power to fling. She never completed her training . . .

'Seven-Double-Seven, paragrav on . . .

'Lilamani, hands over your ears! Tight!'

He clapped his own hands to his ears, his gaze still on the screen. For the briefest of instants the shape of the other orb filled it completely, then it was gone. Simultaneously the whole control chamber vibrated visibly and even through their tightly pressed hands the virtually indestructible meta-plast hull clanged and boomed as if they were in the mouth of a monster bell. In the screens the stars gyrated wildly for some seconds, then steadied. Makettrig took his hands from his ears.

'Report damage, Seven-Double-Seven.'

'No damage.'

The image of the other orb was now in Number Three screen and growing rapidly smaller.

'She'll still have been trying to fling when we hit,' he said with a touch of compassion in his voice. 'Doubt if she'll have had the presence of mind to apply paragrav in time. If so, with a grazing impact like that, the spin'll have tossed them around a bit—they'll be deafened as well. Some time before they recover, I expect—assuming their necks and heads aren't broken.

'So we shouldn't be bothered again for the rest of this flight—and I hope,' he added viciously, 'Shams was with them.'

'Shams,' Lilamani said with conviction, 'will be on Mercury by now.'

Chapter Ten

I—FIRST OF THE SUN

Of the solar planets, Mercury is singular in more ways than one. It is closest to the primary, travelling in an elliptical orbit which at perihelion is forty-five million, six hundred thousand kilometres and at aphelion sixty-nine million, six hundred thousand kilometres from the sun. Its orbital period, that is its 'year', is a small fraction under eighty-eight standard Earth days, during which it rotates on its own axis precisely three times. Its solar 'day' is one hundred and seventy-six days, or the equivalent of two of its own 'years'. Because of the strongly elliptical shape of its orbit, its orbital velocity varies from just over thirty kilometres per second at aphelion to just over fifty-seven kilometres per second at perihelion. Its rotation on its own axis and its orbiting of the sun are therefore not quite in phase, causing an apparent wobbling, or libration, and, for observers on certain parts of its surface, two rather startling effects.

At that equatorial longitude where the sun is overhead when the planet is at perihelion the sun is most distant at dawn and sunset. A man standing there will consequently see a comparatively small sun jerk into the sky at dawn, after which it will decelerate as it climbs, swelling until it approaches zenith. Less than a degree past zenith it will stop, reverse its motion, proceed back about a degree, stop again, reverse again and slowly accelerate, shrinking, until it plummets beyond the horizon eighty-eight days after dawning. The stars in the sky (and without an atmosphere they can be seen) will seem to

move three times as fast as the sun—and the brightest ‘stars’ in Mercury’s sky are Venus and Earth. On the other hand, at an equatorial longitude ninety degrees away another man will see a huge sun slowly heave itself almost completely above the skyline at dawn, apparently consider its new kingdom, then sink back to disappear almost entirely, after which it will rise again for the true dawn of the long searing day to transit the sky, shrinking as it quickens its pace, until meridian. From meridian it will decelerate and swell again, until in the evening it will merge reluctantly with the horizon—then return to nod good-bye before it finally sinks out of sight.

Yet in spite of Mercury’s peculiarities, Makettrig thought, there were similarities between it and Titan. With diameters of four thousand, six hundred, and six thousand, four hundred, kilometres respectively they were of the same order of size; Mercury had no atmosphere, while Titan’s was so tenuous as to be negligible; and they equally presented environments so inimical as to require all man’s ingenuity to survive on them.

On Mercury, indeed, so Lilamani had just disclosed, men stood embattled at the poles, in conflict not only with the sun’s ferocious radiation (as if that were not enough), but with each other. He had, of course, already guessed something of the sort, and, in spite of her seeming willingness to do so just before their encounter with Lydia’s orb, she had in fact revealed very little more than that. It seemed that her people were not numerous and were indeed the descendants of those first pioneers from the subcontinent of India which Roland had mentioned before the start of this mission. For some reason which she had so far not explained their colony had remained confined to a single location in the neighbourhood of the South Pole. Later, and at about the same time when the resurgent black races had been engaged in overrunning the white colonies on Venus, an invading force from Earth had arrived on Mercury. They had been repulsed from the occupied area of the South Pole, but had succeeded in estab-

lishing themselves at the North Pole, or somewhere near it. Again for some reason which she had declined, or had been unable, to explain, they had been content, once established, to remain similarly isolated in their location. Since then, the two races had lived in their separated parts of the planet 'in balance', as she had put it. Until quite recently. For a new leader had risen among the people of the North Pole in the person of Shams, whose immediate aim seemed to be the elimination of the Southern colony. He had evidently been seeking allies on Earth; but he had already, again to use her phrase, 'disturbed the balance', and Makettrig himself, she had implied, might be a key figure in redressing the 'balance'. But how he was expected to help, she had adamantly refused to say, or even to hint, in spite of his most persistent questioning.

They stood now side by side before the transparency watching the planet's rapidly swelling disk. On her instructions, he had swung the orb away from its original trajectory and it was now orbiting in from below the plane of the ecliptic; they were looking down on the planet's south pole. One half of the disk glared in the light of the neighbouring sun so fiercely that even from that angle they felt the warmth of its surface against their faces like a distant fire; the other half, in that savage division of light and shade, was only detectable by its occultation of the further stars. Like areas of Titan, like Earth's moon, Mercury now showed itself to Makettrig as a rampantly mountainous world; and, as on Earth's moon, there was no atmosphere to ameliorate the raging onslaught of the sun. At this distance and from this approach, rock faces among the peaks and gorges of that tumbled, tumultuous landscape glittered in the bombardment of merciless light and there were areas which seemed to shine with a rosy glow of their own—not seeming, but fact, Makettrig suddenly realized, for surfaces slanted to catch the full strength of the sun must be at furnace heat; they were indeed shining with their own light.

What strange reactions must result in a crucible the size

of a planet, he wondered—the physicists and the chemists of the solar system should be swarming here on this, the sun's own laboratory. What had kept it so isolated for so long? He glanced aside at the clean-cut lines of Lilamani's dark, beautiful profile and felt again that sense of wonder and mystery which had plagued him throughout this mission and which she had so consistently refused to satisfy. Apparently unaware of his scrutiny, her gaze remained intent as she held her hand upright in front of her eyes. Suddenly she pointed with the other.

'There!' she said, her voice taut, betraying an undertone of excitement which he had not heard in it before. 'On the night side. Just within the western limb of the Terminator. At about eighty-five degrees of latitude. A patch of light. Shield your eyes and you'll see it.'

Copying her, he held his hand so that it occulted the sunlit half of the disk. At first, he thought he saw what could have been a peak catching the last rays of the sun in the planet's long evening, then realized that distance had deceived him, that the patch must cover too large an area to be that. Furthermore, the light had a softly golden quality, quite different from the fierce white of reflected light from rock faces in the lit half.

'I see it. What is it?'

'Its first discoverer named it Mount Antoniadi. But he saw it in daylight. Now we just call it The Mountain.'

Thinking that the golden glow, weirdly beautiful, even at this distance, must be the result of artificial illumination, he asked, 'Is that where you people live?'

She was silent for a long moment, then she said, 'We live in the range surrounding it. Underground, like you do on Titan.' Again, she fell silent. Then she said in a lowered and oddly reverent tone, 'The Crystal Halls are in The Mountain.'

He looked at her with sharply quickened interest; this was the first time she had mentioned any names in relation

to her planet, or even hinted at any of its features. But her gaze was still intent and he had the impression that she was only half aware of what she had said.

'Well,' he said impatiently. 'What are these Halls?'

Still without taking her gaze from its watch of the planet, she murmured, 'The Mountain's our destination. You'll be seeing the Halls. I hope. Be patient.'

He scowled his frustration, but seeing how fixed her gaze remained, he returned his own to the weirdly glowing mountain. Something very odd was beginning to happen down there.

He could as yet detect no shape among the glowing area which would justify the name of a mountain; but the light was no longer steady. It was pulsing. Now a sort of halo seemed to be forming above it. The halo grew steadily brighter, brighter and larger. It was in movement. A glowing ring of *something* was accelerating up from the surface of the planet. By the black deeps it was coming directly towards them!

'What is that?' he asked sharply.

'Ah. So you can see it.'

'Of course I can. Why shouldn't I?'

And then he realized that the orb had failed to sound the alarm. He spoke into the air with sudden urgency. 'Seven-Double-Seven: energy source approaching on collision course. Detect. Analyse. Compute trajectories. Report.'

There was a pause, then, 'No detectable energy source above the planetary surface.'

Maketrig gasped. A malfunction! he thought—that collision with Lydia's orb? But Seven-Double-Seven had reported no damage. It was unheard of. 'Manual override,' he snapped and leaped for the control console.

At last, Lilamani took her rapt gaze from the planet to say quickly, 'There's nothing wrong with your orb. Its sensors operate within the electromagnetic spectrum only, don't they? That isn't radiation as you know it.' Almost dreamily, she added: 'The Halls are escorting us in.'

II—ANTECHAMBER

In this surround, Seven-Double-Seven seemed diminished to the size of a granule.

The glowing ring which had risen to encircle it with no observable effect on its sensors then, or later, had sunk with it to the surface of the planet and vanished as mysteriously as it had come into being. And now they stood outside the orb in their space suits, she carrying her small case, which once again contained her golden circlet, he staring and staring.

They had landed on a level space within the bowl of a vast crater, its mountainous rim circling behind them, flinging peaks like black fingers against the star-seeded sky. But in the centre of the bowl, filling the greater part of it and wholly dwarfing the surrounding peaks, stood that seeming anomaly, The Mountain.

In the universe which Makettrig knew there were many wonders and he was accustomed to scenes of breathtaking beauty and majesty. He had stood on more than one world and on many a lonely island in space and seen ranges and rocky massifs of every conceivable size and variety. But he had never seen anything remotely like this.

From where they stood, its base seemed to be roughly circular and must, he judged, be several kilometres in diameter. It rose from the crater floor abruptly, without any buttress of foothills, in a huge cliff, unbroken, smooth as glass, circling away from them to the right and left, until in the far distances its outlines intersected the dark horizons. Perhaps a kilometre above them, the cliff ended sharply and cleanly, as if a mighty axe had sliced into the mountain to cut a step, of which the cliff was the riser. This step circled the mountain for as far as Makettrig could see in either direction and, though it was difficult to judge because of the per-

spective, it seemed to be at its highest just opposite where they were standing, sinking evenly as it stretched away on both sides, though never quite reaching the crater floor before it was lost to sight. Above the step a new cliff began, equally unbroken, equally vertical, equally smooth, to end equally abruptly in a second step, but this time tilting in the opposite direction. And so the mountain climbed, cliff after cliff, step after step, its girth decreasing with each step, until at last, far, far, far above a final slender spire seemed to stir the stars themselves.

And the whole mountain from the slim, solitary, distant peak to the vast disk of its base glowed; glowed with a gentle, faintly pulsing, golden light.

This, Makettrig thought with awe, must surely be the greatest marvel in all the solar system, and was astonished that no rumour of it had reached the other planets. And yet, in spite of the utter strangeness of it, he was haunted by a faint, nagging sense of familiarity. For the circumscribing cliffs of those huge disks piled one upon the other were formed of a number of flat planes, so that each vertical section was like a huge facet. By a considerable feat of imagination he saw it reduced in size, small enough to hold in the palm of his hand—and was reminded, now, of the dodecahedral symmetry of the crystals which formed the brains of the battle orbs; those Brain Crystals which were found on Jupiter's moons and which also glowed with a light of their own on certain occasions. Yet for their culture the emanations of the Red Spot were required; what had caused this mighty crystal—if crystal it were—to grow solitary here? Or were there others like it on this planet so close to the raging heat of the sun? With an effort, he wrenched his gaze away from the golden heights and looked about him.

Apart from themselves, there was no sign of human artifact or activity within sight.

'I thought you told me,' he said into his suit microphone, 'that your people lived somewhere about here.'

Lilamani's voice replied flatly, 'Wait. We've arrived at a fortunate moment. Look up at the peak.'

He let his glance climb up the crystal heights once again, step after glorious step, to the distant, glowing spire. And after a time a new star seemed to be born at its very tip. Slowly, slowly the star grew in brightness, began to elongate down that slender, uttermost crystal height, until it was like a needle of fire, like a flame at the tip of a votary candle. A candle for a planet. And that far flame seemed to be infecting the entire mountain, for now shafts of rosy light rayed throughout its substance so that the whole blazed with a new, soft splendour.

At long last, Lilamani's head moved within her helmet and her voice came to him softly.

'We call it the Second Evening. The sun's rays strike the peak before it sets for the second time. It lasts for some days, but people will be turning their lights on now.'

Reluctantly, Makettrig took his glance from that mighty, yet gentle, glory to look round at the encircling mountains and saw lights begin to wink on among the peaks and cliffs, until soon the crater walls were a rim of firefly light.

Lilamani said, 'We go inside The Mountain now.'

She set off at a slight slant and he followed, his mind wholly flooded with his curiosity, dumbly wondering what it was going to be like to enter a jewel so stupendous, so light-imbued.

They covered the distance between the orb and the base of the cliff quickly in the langorous, effortless leaping paces of movement on low-gravity worlds, until they were within fifty metres of it, when Lilamani held up her hand and they halted. Makettrig could see no sign of an opening, but after they had waited for some seconds a circular patch within the translucent substance of the cliff blossomed brightly about a metre above its base and slightly to their right. Promptly heading towards it, she led him to the edge of a shallow depression.

The depression was about three metres in circumference and its bottom seemed to be filled with a mist, glowing with the same quality of golden light as The Mountain itself.

'Follow me. Do as I do. Keep your arms to your sides and your legs together.'

Without looking back to see if he were following, she walked down and stepped out, her arms and legs straight, like a diver jumping feet first. Slowly, more slowly than was warranted by the planet's gravity, she sank into the mist, until her helmet was covered. The mist showed no sign of disturbance, nor could he see down into it; she had totally disappeared. Not without a slight qualm, he followed, and in his turn sank down.

He felt nothing at first, but as the mist crept up to his shoulders he became aware by the slow deflation of his space suit of increasing pressure, then, as his face plate sank beneath the surface of the mist, he heard a high, sweet ringing. The ringing continued, the pressure now remaining constant, until some seconds later his feet softly touched a solid surface and he came to rest. The mist thinned about him, withdrawing upwards to fill a circular cavity in a ceiling, its gentle radiance however, still sufficient to light the black, glassy walls of a small chamber.

Lilamani had moved well to one side, giving him room to arrive, and evidently they had passed through an airlock of some sort, for she was already divesting herself of her space suit. He had never met anything like it before, but now he was beyond surprise; for he had entered a marvel and his state had become almost childlike, his eyes innocent, expectant, wondering. By the time he had taken his own suit off, she had hung hers on a hook among others on a wall and had taken her golden circlet with its skull and crystal eyes out of its case. Now, slowly, she lifted it to her brow, watching him.

Although she had her own sense of humour, he had noticed that she was not a person who easily smiled; but now her

gaze was unusually grave and her action itself had solemnity, as if she were placing a crown. She said nothing, however, merely signing to him to follow her through a slit-like opening in one of the walls.

The opening led into a narrow, rectangular gallery. Its walls were of the same black, glassy stuff as in the chamber, but its ceiling had glowing, golden streaks in it, which lit their way, dimly at first. It began to climb sharply upwards and as it did so the streaks of golden light spread to cover the ceiling entirely, then to creep down the walls, and Makettrig guessed that they were ascending into the substance of The Mountain itself.

They debouched suddenly into a high polyhedral chamber. The many surfaces of its walls and roof glowed with The Mountain's own soft light and it was like being inside a gently fluorescent jewel, as Makettrig had imagined it might be. It was beautiful, yet for some reason he could not quite name he was vaguely disappointed. In the centre of the chamber and evidently expecting them, for he was facing the passage entrance and showed no surprise at their sudden appearance, a man stood unmovingly. Going ahead of Makettrig, Lilamani went directly up to him, halted and bowed. Then she stepped aside.

'Pandit-ji, this is Warden Makettrig,' she said; then after a slight pause, and in the manner of one introducing an inferior to a superior: 'Makettrig, this is Pandit Deokhali Prasad.'

Though Makettrig, his understanding and his imagination battered by wonders such as he had never encountered before, was in a state of suspended judgment which was almost innocence, he was still the same somewhat hot-headed warden of Titan and mindcontrol emper, still not a man to give deference without proof of its due. He surveyed the other coolly.

The Pandit had the same long, smooth black hair as Lilamani, the same clean-cut features, the same brown skin; but

his nose had a slight curve to it, which hers had not, and his jaw was square. A cloak of some silvery, shimmering stuff reached from his shoulders to his ankles. There was something about the grave and understanding look in his eyes as, faintly smiling, he returned Makettrig's perhaps over-lengthy scrutiny, which seemed to suggest that he was not young, even by the standards of Titan. His own examination was equally frank and he seemed to be satisfied by what he saw, for he nodded slowly to himself, then looked aside at Lilamani.

'I have no doubt this is the man.' Then he smiled at Makettrig. 'Greetings, Warden Makettrig. As the first Envoy from your race to ours for many centuries, we had hoped to be able to receive you with ceremony in more suitable surroundings. But now events press and we need you—' He broke off, as if seeking a suitable word, then went on with a faint shrug, 'Your help.'

At this point, Makettrig could not resist trying to interrupt, but the Pandit held up his hand.

'I am aware that our need is still a mystery to you.' He nodded towards Lilamani. 'That emblem which Lilamani is wearing on her brow has, in a sense, kept us in touch with you—though you must not think of it as merely a communication device such as you have on your wrist. In your terminology, you might call it a sensor—a sort of compass which guided Lilamani to you.'

Again he held up his hand as Makettrig opened his mouth in another attempt to interrupt.

'Understanding will come to you later, I hope—if you are willing. In the meantime, I can tell you that it is also an instrument of power. It protected you during your flight.'

Here he paused to let his gaze rest on Lilamani and Makettrig realized that at least one of his questions had at last been answered; for if the Pandit were to be believed, this could explain why Shams had never invaded Seven-Double-Seven's control chamber.

'Perhaps in allowing herself to be separated from it while

you were on Earth,' the Pandit continued, 'Lilamani made an error of judgment. But its powers do not lie in the physical realm. You were among potential enemies; it could have been taken from her by force, which would have been fatal—and to some extent it still protected her.' Again he paused, this time to glance reflectively at the golden skull. 'You may also regard it,' he went on, 'as a symbol of our situation on this planet. For when our ancestors arrived here they discovered that it was already inhabited by sentient . . . beings.

'Mercury has no magnetic field, but there is what we call a psycho-physical field. This mountain is at one of the two nodes of that field. It is . . . inhabited. The other and opposite node is also . . . occupied. We have named that other node "The Caverns". You should understand that the psycho-physical field has polarity—a polarity which is nearly, but not quite coincidental with the gravitational poles of the planet. You will be meeting the beings who inhabit this node, if you consent, so I will only say now that whereas our mode of existence is active, theirs in essence is contemplative and is almost wholly confined to domains of the mind about which we still know little. We call them the Companions. They made us welcome and taught us much—but in return for our keeping their existence secret.' He smiled sadly. 'Their mistrust of mankind in its present state of development was justified later by the second invasion from Earth . . .

'However, conflict—though not as we understand it—is not unknown to them, for the polarity between the two nodes is psychical, as well as physical, and until our arrival there was a state of what I had best call "balanced tension" between them. For the Companions that balance is healthy and our arrival disturbed it. The arrival of invaders, paradoxically, gave them the opportunity to redress the balance and for some centuries the races of man on this planet have lived with their respective Companions in stressed harmony at the two poles.

'Then Shams appeared. His powers are great, but so are the powers of our Companions, and why a single individual should have been able to disturb the balance so effectively is something of a mystery to us. His declared aim is to unify the human population of the planet. But that is an euphemism for conquest, for in a deep sense we already have unity through our Companions. Above all, we have had peace.

'So, once again, there is a need to redress the balance.

'Here I must broach another matter which is a mystery to us and I am forced to be vague. For it seems that while a part of the balancing factor necessary to counter Shams's activities is already on this planet, another and essential part resides in a certain individual who is not—or was not.

'That person, we now believe, is you.

'Yet that is not all, for it also seems that, in all, four individuals are involved in a complex inter-relationship, who in some sense, which I am unable to comprehend, must be brought together, if a final solution is to be achieved.'

He finished speaking and looked at Makettrig expectantly, as if Makettrig himself might now be able to enlighten him.

And for a moment an ephemeral something—a thought? a memory? a dream?—did indeed stir at the back of Makettrig's mind and his glance strayed aside to Lilamani's face, to the golden skull on her forehead. Then he shook his head in bewilderment.

'Means nothing to me.' He laughed briefly. 'Though I can understand now why Lilamani didn't want to tell me all this until at least I'd seen The Mountain. What am I supposed to do now? Have I a choice?'

An unreadable expression shadowed the other's brown features—disappointment? Makettrig wondered. But it passed almost as soon as it came and he said slowly, 'Yes, you've a choice. You've already been in conflict with Shams. You know I speak the truth when I say he could destroy you in ways more terrible than death. Are you willing to meet him again? Knowing he may prevail?'

Maketrig's eyes became stony. 'I am,' he said curtly.

The Pandit bowed. 'Then I have to tell you that those whom we call the Companions inhabit the Halls within this mountain—'

'Here!' Maketrig interrupted, looking round at the otherwise empty-seeming chamber.

The other smiled. 'Not here. This might be termed an antechamber. Will you consent to come to the Halls to meet them?'

After the journey and a build-up like this, Maketrig thought to himself sardonically, it would have needed a gun to keep him away. 'I consent,' he said briefly.

Again, the Pandit bowed.

'Then will you now please take off your clothes.'

III—THE HALLS

Mystified and impatient to satisfy his rampant curiosity Maketrig certainly was; but this was not the sort of request which a member of his somewhat puritanical race could accept without protest. He gaped at the Pandit.

'Take off my clothes!' he repeated with a tinge of horror in his tone.

The Pandit had already begun to throw open his own shimmering cloak, but he paused and looked up with an expression of mild surprise. 'Do you object? It is our custom when entering the Halls.'

And he was, Maketrig now saw, himself totally naked under his cloak. Maketrig turned his shocked glance on Lilamani. She also was in process of disrobing herself, for her tunic already lay at her feet. 'By the deeps, you too!'

Perhaps with the memory of a certain other occasion in her mind, she raised an eyebrow and said drily, 'Afraid, Maketrig?'

The Pandit's glance flashed from one to the other, at first with puzzlement, then with a hint of amusement.

Maketttrig scowled. Then realizing uncomfortably that in the light of their previous solemnity such qualms might with justice be thought petty, he turned his back on Lilamani, grimly pulled off his uniform and stood naked. Deliberately, she came in front of him and swept him from head to foot with an all-encompassing, clinical scrutiny, from which a certain curiosity was not entirely lacking. She permitted herself a faint smile.

He stared back at her angrily, noting nevertheless in the stony way of his kind that her body was exceedingly beautiful: high-breasted, waist deeply indented, limbs straight and slender. His glance encountered hers and a memory from that other time was like an echo of tumult. He looked away. She must have guessed his reaction, for again she smiled, not without malice.

'Your virginity's safe here, Maketttrig—we're at the gate of the Halls.' Her expression became suddenly grave and her tone changed abruptly. 'Come,' she said brusquely. 'Give me your hand.'

Still feeling angry with her and not the least like doing so, he declined, but the Pandit said gently, 'It's our custom when escorting a stranger into the Halls to go hand-in-hand.'

Suddenly it came to Maketttrig that in the circumstances his mood was childish in the extreme. Silently and somewhat shamefacedly, he held out his hands. They each took one, clasping it palm to palm.

Now they moved forward together, she on his left, the other on his right, until on the far side of the chamber they came to the entrance of another gallery. But this one was triangular in shape, its apex being at least five metres above its floor and its base broad enough to accept the three of them abreast. It arrowed for as far as Maketttrig could see directly into The Mountain.

They set off down it, Makettrig urged by the gentle pressures of the others' hands, gradually lengthening his strides, until soon the long, leaping steps of the three were in unison, and in the wind of their passage his ball of red hair billowed above his ears while the longer black tresses of the other two streamed behind them. The gallery stretched on and on, never varying, and as they plunged further into the heart of The Mountain Makettrig lost all sense of perspective; for in that pervasive golden light, shining so gently from walls and floor, their bodies threw no shadows and they seemed to be flying through a golden universe of their own, without beginning, without end, in which their leaping pacing had the quality of a slow, stately dance. And Makettrig quickly realized that without their hands to guide him, he would in that shadowless, dreamy light and at that pace soon have been blundering from wall to wall.

After a while, the quality of the light glowing from the walls and floor began to change and faint streaks of rose, of violet and green began to appear among the gold, and then Makettrig saw ahead a tiny patch of brighter light. The patch grew rapidly, outlining the triangular shape of the gallery. Their pace slowed. But even so, the end found Makettrig unprepared.

Unprepared for the sudden blaze of light. Light, glittering gleaming, corruscating in rays and flashes and sparkles of greens and blues and yellows and violets; light so intense that he wondered that he was not blinded, yet so gentle that it was like a caress; light in continual movement, colour interchanging with colour. And through it all shone a shaft of deep rose like a song.

Unprepared for the space. On his own world, Makettrig had stood in huge caverns hollowed from out of the mountain chains, but never had he seen, or imagined, so mighty an enclosure as this, for its furthest reaches were beyond the stretch of his sight and its heights were lost in a maze of shifting colour, far, far above. The whole centre of this

great mountain, it seemed, was hollow. Scarcely able to believe what he saw, he flung his gaze to trace crystalline columns reaching up from the floor, or flying buttresses arching out from the nearer walls to span incredible distances, so delicate and fragile they seemed. And through them all light streamed like many-hued flames, so that in perspective he seemed to be looking through traceries of lace made of pure colour.

And from above, from so far above that its unseen source seemed to be directly overhead, the shaft of rosy colour reached vertically down to the floor. And from far, from near, from all around him there came to his ears a vastly murmurous, yet infinitely sweet tintinnabulation.

He had no need to ask if these were the Halls. He stood amazed, wondering, struck utterly dumb by the beauty, by the overwhelming majesty of the place. Presently, however, he became aware of presences. Then a voice—no, not one voice, but many—seemed to speak in his mind, very sweetly, though his ears heard only that continuing murmurous tintinnabulation.

We bid you welcome.

At that, and as if they had simultaneously received a permission, Makettrig felt the other two gently tug at his hands. He let them lead him forward, his mind full of a strange and growing delight, and for a time they walked over a level space. Then they began to pass among polyhedral crystalline masses: many-faceted, sparkling hillocks, in height varying from a few centimetres to several metres. And each shone with a different hue of living, moving light and it was as if they were strolling through a garden of jewels: diamond and beryl, emerald and aquamarine, sard and garnet, topaz and sapphire, opal and zircon, spinel, amethyst and moonstone; such jewellery as surely had never been seen by man outside this world; for though each crystal formation seemed to have its particular colour, the colours swirled, waxing and waning, as if the crystals were imbued with life.

With life?

Yes, the sweet, singing voices in Makettrig's mind replied, *we are alive.*

Now, the crystals began to cluster more closely together and their path among them wound increasingly; but in spite of its turnings, Makettrig saw, its general direction seemed to be towards that rosy shaft which fell from the heights, for its girth grew until it was no longer a slender-seeming thing—but still a thing of pure light. Was it, he wondered, now ready to accept anything, some result of the sun striking that highest spire of The Mountain? Again, the sweet voices answered in his mind.

It is the distilled light of the sun.

So, twisting and turning, and still hand in hand, they made their way slowly and more slowly, approaching the rosy column from this way, then that, as if shyness were being forced on them, until at last they themselves were bathed in its rays. Makettrig felt a warm glow, a tingling over his whole skin which was so extreme a pleasure, so wholly delightful, that he knew that clothing of any sort would have entailed an insupportable deprivation—if not sacrilege. Still in thrall to that exquisite sensation, he found himself, quite suddenly, in an open space. It was roughly circular and in its centre, perhaps the very centre of The Mountain's vast, hollow core, stood a solitary slender column. Unlike any other formation, or 'growth', in that whole huge immensity which Makettrig could see, it was curved, a smooth and perfect cylinder. And in startling contrast to the rosy light which fell about it, it was milky white, yet a white in which points of light gleamed and moved, like jewels in a mist. In spite of the extreme simplicity of its shape, Makettrig had a sudden clear vision of a quality of beauty in it equal to all the other beauties in those Halls and he halted involuntarily, his gaze enrapt. But the others, still gently tugging at his hands, led him on up to it, then halted, and at last released him. They took a pace or two backwards, away

from him, so that he was left to face the column alone. A single, lilting voice spoke in his mind.

Behold yourself.

'Myself?' he said aloud, startled at last out of his state of wondering marvelment.

Yourself.

"That makes no sense to me."

And then the same voice, at least Makettrig thought it was the same because of its lilting quality, began to sing a sort of chant in his mind.

At the opposite pole of this planet there are beings like ourselves.

So the chant began—or seemed to begin; for sometimes the voiceless voice sang sweetly and clearly, but at others it seemed to be mixed with visions and concepts for which his brain had never learned words. Nevertheless, its meaning was clear enough to begin with, repeating the same story of the coming of the two races from Earth which the Pandit had told him. Then a new theme appeared, for pictures now began to form of war, of death and destruction, sometimes, too, of triumph and glory, but always with a return to cruelty and violence; and through all the scenes the lives of four beings were interwoven. And as the story of those four continued to invade his mind, he became increasingly aware of a sense of familiarity, as if . . . as if they were *memories*! His past? No, he refused to believe it. But if it were, then who were those other three?

Remember, the soundless voice said, *she who died.*

Mbala! he thought. Mbala; during his emf of her he had learned that they had known each other before.

Remember, the voice insisted.

Suddenly and with startling vividness three little freshets of recollection from his present life occurred in sequence: three little incidents when for spaces of time so tiny that they could probably have been measured in nano-seconds, he had looked into other eyes and promptly forgotten. Other eyes

. . . Why, those had been moments of recognition! First Shams, then Lilamani, then Mbala . . . *Shams!*

Were those the other three? Was that what all this meant?

Affinities bind you, the voice sang as if to prove a point. You with two; one with you.

One? He had affinities with Mbala and Lilamani.

That left Shams.

Shams had an affinity with him? *Shams.* The thought was insupportable. Or was it with this column, which had twice been referred to as 'himself'. Then he remembered Shams's look of astonishment and dawning horror when their glances had first clashed in Treetop. By the black deeps had the man been emping *him* then? And lived that hatred of himself?

But now a new concept was slowly presented to him: a concept both difficult to understand and, if such meaning as he was able to extract from it were correct, extremely distasteful to him. For as the One-Above-All had many aspects, so the voice seemed to say, even so did His creatures. But sometimes the creatures were unable to contain their multiplicity and fissioned into two, or more, persona. Personalities which could manifest themselves in succession within the same body—or in separate bodies, not necessarily confined to one world.

The four of them different aspects of what had originally been a single entity? Was that what was meant? No, he could not accept it.

Yes it was so, the voice insisted.

Shams it said, or seemed to say, was the oldest in this incarnation. After his appearance the beings of the Halls had set a trap. A trap for a soul, in the hope that they could impart their knowledge and heal the multiple being. It had failed in part, in part succeeded; for they had caught a part of a part.

Therefore, we now ask you to meet yourself.

For a timeless gap in time Maketrig stared with something more than horror at the milky column. A part of himself in that? His uncle had once said that he was a man in search of

his soul. Could he have been speaking the truth more exactly than he knew? Could it be true? Well, if it were, he thought with sudden grim resolution, there was one way of finding out for sure. For if he had an affinity with anybody—or *anything*—then he must at least have one for a separated part of himself. But how did one start an emp of a thing, which, however beautiful, however mysteriously, or weirdly, endowed with life, was on the face of it little more than an inorganic block?

'It should have eyes,' he muttered aloud.

At that Lilamani stepped forward from behind him and went up to the column and as slowly and solemnly as she had donned it lifted the circlet from her brow and placed it on top of the column where, he now saw, a niche of precisely the right size was ready to receive it.

Now, he had eyes to look into. And now at last he understood the real symbolism of that golden skull—had it been fashioned for this purpose? If so, by whose hands?

Lilamani turned to face him. 'I made it,' she said quietly, as if she had heard his unspoken question. 'They directed me.'

But now his gaze was on the crystal eyes and he found he could not take it from them. For of a sudden he was in the grip of unquellable, raging desire—not any mere lust of the flesh such as Lilamani had by her arts and in her naughtiness roused in him, but a surging, wrenching, tumultuous want of the spirit which could not be denied. His mind and his soul rushed forth.

The scene somersaulted . . .

JOY.

No words could truly express what the personality called Makettrig then experienced. It was the fulfilment of a need, undefined, unknown, yet suffered life-long. It was a communication and a melding so total, so shattering that he was unmade—and re-made. It was a paeon of joy so piercing, yet so mighty that the very Halls seemed to blaze with an added splendour.

Man and crystal.

Man/crystal.

MAKETTRIG.

The scene somersaulted.

And Makettrig found himself staring at a glassy column, from which all light, all colour, had departed. He turned to look at Lilamani and the Pandit, his gaze serene, man/crystal, burdened with the knowledge and attributes of two orders of beings, knowing what he had to do and how.

‘I go to find Shams.’

He flicked out of sight.

IV—RETURN TO A CRYSTAL COLUMN

Here all was dimness, even for Makettrig’s sensitive eyes. High above him a domed roof shone with a blue-tinged, nacreous light, and in the depths below and on the encircling walls blue gleams flickered faintly. He stood on the spatula-like end of a tongue of rock which jutted out over an abyss and among the gloom his white body was like a pale, still flame. In the sombre, etiolated light he could see only half tones. Yet that part of him which had once been crystal knew that this was one of the complex of caves called by the men of this planet the Caverns and as much a place of beauty as were the Halls; that the bulbous shapes clinging to the walls, in which the blue fires glinted so feebly, were also crystalline beings. In the same manner as the human part of him had become aware of presences in the Halls, so now, but with the crystal in him more strongly, he was again aware of presences. He spoke voicelessly within his own mind.

Greetings, cousins.

Sharply, with a hint of contempt even: *We are not your cousins.*

He opened his whole mind to them, inviting their inspection.

Wonderingly, then, with overtones of awe: *Greetings, cousin. What do you wish with us?*

Not enmity. I come to right a wrong. I seek Shams. Have I your permission?

Sadly: You have our permission. But beware. He has learned from us.

Give me his direction.

The knowledge came to him.

He left as he had come.

He was in a chamber now, a square, mundane room hewn out of the rock such as the human part of him knew in the troglodyte cities of Titan.

A table was set in its centre, round which three people sat. His still serene gaze identified them in one sweeping glance: Shams, facing him, with Mboya and Ngala on either side. The latter two, he noted, seemed little the worse as a result of the collision between the orbs, except for a small cut on Ngala's skull and a blackened eye in the case of Mboya. Possibly Lydia had shown greater presence of mind than he had thought she would—certainly her recovery must have been quick enough, otherwise they wouldn't have been here by now. As it was, they had evidently only just arrived, for Ngala was saying furiously:

'So they've contacted Prasad! So now Titan has an accredited Envoy on this planet. Is that what you're saying? Eh? Eh? Well, if your way won't work, mine will! A bomb on that mountain and . . .' His voice failed as he followed the direction of Shams's stare.

Yet Mboya was quickest to react, and as quick on the draw as ever. He swivelled in his chair, a weapon simultaneously seeming to flash to his hand.

'Why, just look who's here,' he drawled. His glance flicked towards Shams and his lips twisted into an expression of faint distaste. 'It seems you're not the only man in these parts who

can teleport.' He looked back at Makettrig. 'Man, you certainly gave us a rough ride when you bounced your orb against ours. If it hadn't been for Lydia, we might have been dead. I guess some people here are going to find that hard to forgive, so just you stand nice and still.' His glance swept over his nakedness. 'Though I see you haven't much to hide! Still, when you move, move nice and slow.'

Makettrig said, 'Where is she?'

Mboya's eyes narrowed slightly. 'She's no concern of yours now, man. I've made her my wife. She's on her way back to Earth, where I guess your government has no jurisdiction.'

Ngala had meanwhile been glaring, his wrinkled lips writhing futilely. At last he found his voice. 'You horrible young man!' he quavered. 'Giving us trouble again! Beam him down, Mboya. Now, you fool, now! And *don't look at his eyes!*'

But Makettrig had already locked glances. Mboya's hand slowly opened and the weapon dropped to the floor. His gaze became fixed, his posture rigid with his hand still outstretched and half open.

Ngala shrieked, 'Shams, do something!' Then with a chattering moan he covered his eyes with his hands and swung his chair round so that his back was to the table. Makettrig ignored him and turned his glance on his chief enemy. Shams slowly rose to his feet.

Much of Makettrig's new-found serenity now left him. For though, with the crystal in him, he might be more complete a creature, he was still in part human, and that part remembered the evil Shams had done and was full of loathing. While the crystal in him might accept that, together, Shams and he were aspects of a larger being, the human in him still violently rejected any thought of a reconciliation—on the contrary, willed a continuing schism. To hate oneself might at times be an empty phrase; in this case he was determined to convert it to concrete fact—and he thought he knew just how to make his hate best felt.

He locked his gaze on Shams's and instantly felt the other's will surge to meet his. But with the knowledge and completeness of his man/crystal soul he was the stronger now and, inexorably, his mind reached forth into the other's, and wrested control.

'Emp me, Shams,' he said aloud. 'You can do it. I know. Come into my mind, Shams, and see what *I* saw when I found you torturing Lilamani. Feel what *I* felt when you hurt Mbala.'

He watched a subtle change film the other's eyes; saw a look of horror grow fast in them until Shams's entire countenance had become a mask of suffering and knew, triumphantly, that he could have devised no more exquisite a form of punishment. Then, after a time, something in him, whether from the human or the crystal part he knew not, cried despairingly within the chambers of his innermost being.

Enough! It is yourself you hurt!

And he became aware, fight the growing knowledge how he might, that this was true.

Forgive, the inner voice insisted.

Quite suddenly, he found that he no longer had a will for revenge. He uttered a sigh that was almost a groan.

'Return into your own mind, brother,' he said.

Shams blinked and that terrible expression faded gradually from his features—to be replaced by a different, a look of unutterable, wrenching sadness. And with that look in his eyes he regarded Makettrig for some seconds without speaking. The look passed, changed, became, to Makettrig's wonderment, a smile. Then Shams bowed and turned his back. Abruptly, his whole body jerked, held rigid for a second, then collapsed limply to the floor of the cavern. And Makettrig knew, without having to examine it, that its soul had willingly fled.

Still thinking about that smile, still wondering, he now turned to Mboya.

'You are released,' he said. 'Cease your meddling here and

return to Earth—and take that thing’—he pointed to the gibbering Ngala ‘—with you.’

Mboya’s stiff form relaxed. He gazed for a moment at his still outstretched hand, flexed his fingers, then let it fall. His mouth opened, then shut. He looked at Shams’s body.

‘Dead?’

Makettrig nodded.

‘I guess I never did like him much. You had something in common with him, you know—apart from your powers. Which I just don’t understand and I don’t want to meet you, or anyone like you, ever again . . . What are you going to do about Lydia?’

‘Nothing. If she’s your wife, then she’s a citizen of Earth.’

‘That’s so. Yeah, I guess that’s so . . . But, so help me, she’s your sister.’

Makettrig did not smile. ‘Foster sister,’ he said briefly.

Mboya looked relieved, seemed about to say something else, then thought better of it. He leaned across the table, took Ngala by the nape of his neck and unceremoniously half lifted, half dragged him from the room.

Makettrig gave Shams’s lifeless body a last glance, then left the place in the manner he had come.

He was back in the Halls, standing before the glassy column which had once contained a part of him. Lilamani was waiting beside it. She came forward, looking at him searchingly.

‘Is it over?’

‘It’s over.’ He glanced round him. ‘Where’s the Pandit?’

‘He went.’ Now a veil seemed to shadow her eyes. ‘The crystals spoke to him.’

But now, without forewarning or apparent cause, a queer lassitude overcame Makettrig; he felt drained, without interest in past, present, or future. ‘Did they?’ he said indifferently. ‘Well, I’ve done the job you brought me for, so I’d better begin to take up my post as Envoy. Let’s go.’

‘No,’ she said.

His lassitude dropped away from him sharply. 'What's that? Did you say no? Why in space not?'

She looked at him helplessly, with desperation even, as if needing to put something into words which she either could not, or dared not. Then she began to glance about wildly into the rosy surround.

'Tell him!' she cried aloud. 'Tell him!'

And then, once again, the lilting voice sang in his mind.

You owe two lives. You have two children to make in amends.

He stared at Lilamani. 'Did you hear what I heard,' he almost whispered.

'I already knew.'

'And you *want* it?'

She said nothing, merely gazing at him.

He remembered his final cmp of Mbala, saw again Shams's last smile. 'Knowing who they will be—one in particular?' he insisted.

'I don't care, I don't care!' She seemed unable to contain herself any longer. 'Don't you understand? I love you! I have ever since that—that time in your orb.'

'I like you too. Well, all right, I love you. In my way. But,' the stony Titanian in him continued grimly, recalling his sense of outrage on the occasion, 'you're not going to do *that* to me again. Not now, not until I'm ready, if ever!'

'Am I not?' Suddenly a new light came into her eyes. 'Look around you, Makettrig!'

He did so and saw to his astonishment that the rosy shaft in which they stood had thickened about them, surrounding them, covering them with a blanket of ruby mist so that in those Halls, there, at the core of The Mountain, they were alone together.

'Am I not?' she said again and with growing triumph. 'Am I not? Do you really mean that, Makettrig?'

And then, in spite of himself, he looked into her eyes.

And she smiled . . .